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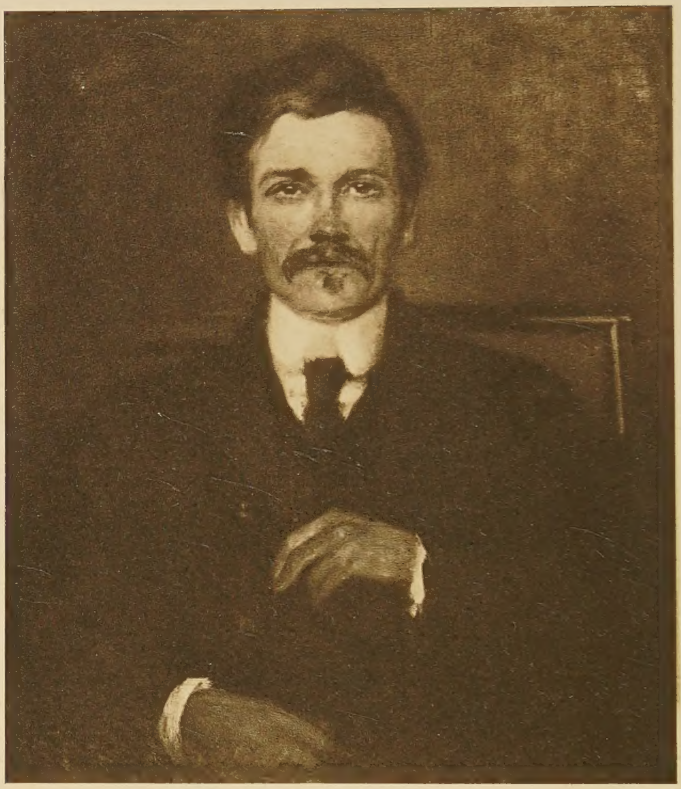

John Millington Synge.
from the painting by J. B. Yeats, R.H.A.

J. M. SYNGE

A CRITICAL STUDY

BY

P. P. HOWE

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To

MAIRE O'NEILL

(Nora : Cathleen : Molly

Pegeen : Deirdre)

NOTE

THIS is not a biographical study of J. M. Synge. "Lies and lives will be written of him," said Mr. Masefield, who was Synge's friend: it is my wish not to add to either. It is more particularly my wish, since a book is shortly to make its appearance that will tell from direct reminiscence all that the world is entitled to hear, written by those who knew Synge well. This book is an essay in dramatic criticism merely, seeking to make clear the beauty and the value of the plays, and their place in English drama.

I wish to make the fullest acknowledgment to Messrs. Maunsel and Company, Limited, the publishers of Synge's complete works. I am indebted also to Sir Hugh Lane, for his consent to the reproduction, for the first time, of the portrait by Mr. J. B. Yeats, R.H.A., which is one of the series of portraits painted

under the Lane Gift hanging in the Dublin Municipal Gallery of Modern Art; and to Mr. D. J. O'Donoghue, Librarian of University College, Dublin, for some kind assistance in drawing up a short Bibliography, which aims at being a mere sketch only.

P. P. H.

London, 1912.

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I

PRELIMINARIES

THERE is need for an essay On the Misuse of the Word *Dramatic*.

Drama, by its nature, can come into being only when men are moved powerfully and suddenly to record the circumstances of life: for the dramatic form is the most exacting of literary forms, demanding a high and sustained emotion in the author; and in its choice there lies implicit a certain impatience with other and less heightened forms, with the slower and more detailed revelation of the epic or novel, with the momentariness of the lyric. The great ages of drama have thus been those when life has been raised to an unusual intensity, or viewed with an excited surprise. The ages of the novel have been those of calmer, more urbane contemplation. The artist in any sort may take what he desires from life, and, letting all else drop away, may raise this to a sudden height; or he may wind himself into life like a skein of silk about

its heart. "What would he do," asks Hamlet, in an intensity of feeling, "had he the motive and the cue for passion that I have? He would drown the stage with tears." It is not altogether fanciful to think the dramatist impatient of the disability under which the novelist works: the novelist must sustain the march of a narrative; the *she said* and *said he* and manner of the sun's setting or a cab-horse's passing while they said it —these things are the camp-followers of the novelist's progress; excellent camp-followers ministering, under proper leadership, to truth and to our pleasure, but irking by their importunity the creative artist of certain temperament in a certain mood. The dramatist is for striking out his words and actions in the round, as it were; his people must stand by virtue of their own concreteness—like chessmen ready to a player's hand, rather than figures worked in silk on an arras. Everything felt by the dramatist shall go into them, and find expression through their mouths only; in his high mood, all else but direct speech and visible action is tiresome and redundant. Thus the dramatist lifts his art out of the literary, and may escape, as Ibsen's Master Builder wished to escape when his own imagination moved him, from the "irrelevancy" of books in a library. The motive and the cue for the dramatist's passion, then, is this quick

desire to make real his imaginings—under the influence, if our supposition be accurate, of surprise; of pleased or excited surprise. The method of realization need not be rapid—so only that the finished work stand quick and eager, leaping to the spectator's imagination, a thing of essentials only. The dramatist's impatience is with inessentials, his disposition is to eliminate them; in actual fact, a patient process, if he go on to observe the further critical canon of Hamlet, and "use all gently: for in the very torrent, tempest, and—as I may say—whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance, that may give it smoothness"; but a process flattering to his impatience in the achievement, by the very smoothness and temper of the finished work. If poetry be "emotion remembered in tranquillity," as Wordsworth said, then drama is, or must seem to be, emotion visualized in action; howsoever tranquil the after-mood of the dramatist.

It is not dramatic that a distraught coal-heaver should execute sudden death upon a wife and seven children, nor that a commercial traveller should be reunited with a long-lost mother; these things are but newspaper "tragedy," and newspaper "drama"; neither of them undramatic of necessity but, until some dramatist's imagination has come to them with

pleasure and surprise, incidents merely in a vast and distracting universe. The Dramatic is not some quality inherent in, and common to, such incidents in the daily round as stand out by their violence or curiosity, as sub-editors believe; notwithstanding they give the lie daily to their belief by tucking away such "dramatic" circumstances in a minor crevice of their sheet, since in a newspapered age these affairs of distraction and coincidence have become a daily occurrence. Nor are sub-editors alone in their misapprehension; many a would-be dramatist shows a confident belief in the essential dramatic virtue of a firearm. A pistol may or may not be dramatic in just the same degree as a beer-jug may or may not be dramatic; Mr. Masefield has drawn drama from the one, but half a hundred practising dramatists have failed to get anything from the other but the bang; for the Dramatic is a quality not in things but in the imagination of the artist who can give to these things an extraordinary significance and purport. There might well be drama behind any little story of the courts; but the drama does not lie in the police report, and evades the police-reporter's manner. He is a supreme dramatist who can move us with some such story, let us say of a youth who killed, or tried to kill, his father, while digging potatoes in a field, and leave us saying at the

end: "Fancy—all that sorrow and beauty out of a little story I wouldn't have given a minute to in the police reports!"

There is nothing undramatic or dramatic but imagination makes it so. The late Lionel Johnson, with his acute critical pen, scratched Boswell and found in him the dramatist; found in him "a dramatic instinct of seizing upon the quickest, liveliest, fullest aspect of things; an unconquerable determination to make the most of life." Boswell "dramatized" Dr. Johnson, then, not recorded him merely: great biography has much akin with great drama: in another and less unsurprised age, Boswell might even have been a dramatist. Who, however, were the dramatists amongst Boswell's contemporaries? Who but Goldsmith, who had returned from wandering on the Continent to find London, whether viewed with his Chinese philosopher's eyes or with his own, full of strange pleasure and excitement; and Sheridan, who came fresh to London also, not a patient Scotsman like Boswell (Boswell would never, one thinks, have abandoned himself to the sustained emotional exaltation necessary to the writing of great drama), but with all an Irishman's capacity to be continually pleased and excited at the surprising exercise of his own wits.

The present is not the moment for the essay we have desiderated. May we, however, since it will prove to our purpose in a moment, go but such a little way into the nature of the Dramatic as to agree upon this: That to come to life, and thus to the theatre, "with pleasure and excitement," is of the essence of the making of drama? The dramatist will have the instinct to seize upon things at their quickest, liveliest, and fullest; we have added, as corollary to this, that he will be impatient of the other literary forms with their various restrictions. In England, religion has never lent to life an intensity which has eventuated in drama of the first magnitude, as it did for a splendid century in Greece; nevertheless, in England also religion was the first motive to drama. But it was temporal excitement, the sudden splendour of a newly illumined world, that possessed the age called Elizabethan, and thrust it hot-foot into drama; minor men even, without being in any full sense dramatists, struck out plays in their divine impatience, plays that can still give pleasure, a thing that can be said of the theatrical journey-work of no other epoch; other men, of less passionate mood, struck into lyric, the common by-product of an age of drama: while Shakespeare came fresh and unspoiled to London, to look on at all the wonders with new eyes.

How much less fresh and unspoiled the enthusiasm of the dramatists of the Restoration : still, they came to their restored theatre, rescued from the Puritans, with real pleasure and excitement, and there were real dramatists amongst them. With Goldsmith and Sheridan the excited surprise was in themselves only, and not in their age ; an accidental outcome of individual environment, but present nevertheless. We may say the same of Wilde and of Mr. Bernard Shaw ; of Mr. Shaw in particular, whose unfailing surprise at a world of his own witty invention sufficed to make him, and has sufficed to keep him, a dramatist. For the rest, the theatre has been supplied for a century by its own craftsmen, unsurprisable. Congreve and Vanbrugh, having nothing to say, did say it very well ; whereas Pinero and Jones, having nothing to say, do not say it very well ; they merely shape it very well. Journeymen at work, for no better cue nor motive than to keep the theatres open, cannot be surprised into making great drama.

In all the English drama, from Sheridan and Goldsmith to Mr. Shaw, there is only one name that will go up amongst the greatest, and that is the name of another Irishman, J. M. Synge.

ii

John Millington Synge was born at Rathfarnham, co. Dublin, April 16, 1871, of an old Wicklow family which had given, one is told, a long line of bishops and archbishops to the ascendancy party. He was educated at Trinity College. After taking his degree he went first to Germany, where he had some idea of training himself for the musical profession, but contented himself with reading German literature. By January 1895 he appears to have been living alone in Paris. We hear of him in Rome, and travelling on foot through France and Bavaria; he travelled much, and on an income of some forty pounds a year, but, although he played his fiddle, as Goldsmith played his flute, it is unlikely that he ever did so for a livelihood, but in return for stories only, from Bavarian peasants and Italian sailors. In Paris he lived in a top-floor room of a students' hotel in the Latin quarter: here he read a great deal of French literature, chiefly the classics; and wrote a little for Irish periodicals, occasionally to the augmentation of his income. An Irishman who met him at this period in literary company did not find Synge "impressive." In 1899 Mr. W. B. Yeats discovered him in his Paris room reading Racine, and looked at one or two of his pieces,

and found that what was wrong with them was that all the vivid life Synge had known had cast no light into his writings. At Mr. Yeats' suggestion Synge went back to live in Ireland: to utilize the Irish which he had learned in youth but was beginning to forget; to "express a life that has never found expression"; and to write for the national theatre Mr. Yeats was then starting. For the next few years he lived a part of every year in Aran, in the extreme west; he liked the life so well that it was not long before he made a journey back to Paris, to sell his books and his bed. He wrote a book about his daily life on the islands, which did not at first find a publisher, and about this time (1900–1901) contributed some articles on Irish literature to the London *Speaker*. Henceforward he divided his year between London, Dublin, and the wilder parts of Ireland. In 1903 Mr. Masefield found him in his room in Handel Street, Bloomsbury, typing his earliest plays on the old-fashioned machine which he used always. The first of these plays was performed in a Dublin hall at the end of 1903, and others quickly after, by the little company which soon, because of its success, moved into the Abbey Theatre. From this time Synge lived a great deal in the theatre, engaged in its practical work with Lady Gregory and Mr. Yeats. He liked this life, "lived as

it were in a ship at sea." In January 1907, *The Playboy of the Western World* was performed; and Mr. Birrell, making his first appearance in Ireland about this time, was astonished to find Dublin obsessed not with any matter of Home Rule but with the question whether the new play was or was not a vilification of Irish womanhood. Riots and abuse shook Synge's physical nature, which was never strong; but they left his intellect untroubled, and his determination to do his own clear work uninfluenced. He was in London again with the Abbey Theatre company at the Great Queen Street Theatre in June 1907; when his plays were first seen on the London stage, and granted immediate recognition by the discerning. He went back to Dublin in a bad state of health, and worked there on his last play, and at preparing his poems for the press. He was a drifting, silent man, who never spoke of himself; at the end, he went into a nursing home, and died there, March 24, 1909. He was never married.

When an old man on the road in Wicklow asked him about himself, Synge writes: "I told him that I was born in Dublin, but that I had travelled afterwards and been in Paris and Rome, and seen the Pope Leo XIII." Outside of the work he left, that is his life, one thinks, as he would have it told.

iii

However far beyond Ireland the appeal and influence of Synge's work may now go, it is important, in an examination of that work, to look a little further at the outset into the immediate circumstances that called it forth. It can by no means be set down to accident that the sole major dramatist who has written in English in our time should have been moved to write in a country where life still has its aspects that are free and wild, and where speech is unconscious of the newspapers; and for a theatre that is young and vigorous and unobscured. London, since it outgrew the just proportions of a city, has produced no great drama. Paris does not produce great drama. No great drama has come out of the United States of America, where the life is young and its sudden expansion such as should have moved men powerfully to express themselves in the stronger arts. It is noteworthy that the one supreme dramatist of the century which has passed emerged from a small nation, where the face of life was still simple, although beginning to be distracted; and that his plays at first were laughed at as parochial. Is this fancied antipathy between great drama and great cities—where the confusion of irrelevant business obscures the things

it is the dramatist's concern, above all other artists, to seize at their quickest and most lively—no more than fanciful? Mr. Yeats himself has noted the disconcerting contradiction, that drama has need of cities that it may find men in sufficient numbers, and that great cities destroy the emotions to which drama appeals; but Mr. Yeats had the good fortune, or the good sense, to work for a theatre in a city less than the largest, and incalculably less a prey to distraction. Dublin is a great deal nearer to Periclean Athens or Elizabethan London than to modern London or modern Paris. A man may see life in a city the size of Dublin, in every sense but that of the cosmopolitan guide-book; he may even, without ricking his powers of comprehension, see it whole; in Paris, in New York, above all in London, it is not possible to see life for the lives. We may surely conclude that it was not by accident that Ireland came by a dramatist, nor that Synge, having found in the older life there the clearness of vision that the cities of Europe had failed to give him, shaped his plays for the Dublin stage.

In 1899 Mr. George Moore, another sojourner in Paris, but one who, unlike Synge, had drunk deeply of its influences and been satisfied, took his way to Dublin, in response—as he has himself told us—to a vision not unlike that summoning

the apostle to Damascus; and found "the poets singing in all the bowers of Merrion Square; and all in a new language that the poets had learned, the English language having been discovered by them, as it had been discovered by me, to be a declining language, a language that was losing its verbs." This was eight years after the formation of the Irish National Literary Society; Mr. Yeats, with Mr. George Russell, Mr. Edward Martyn, and the late Lionel Johnson for henchmen, had done good work in clearing a way for the arts in Ireland, by their criticism setting Clarence Mangan, who wrote "Dark Rosaleen," at the head of the national poets in the place of Thomas Davis the politician: and now the Irish National Theatre was about to come to birth, with the assistance of actors imported from London, it is true, and with no more dramatic justification than Mr. Yeats' own beautiful and shadowy Countess Cathleen, and a fairly capable imitation from Ibsen by Mr. Martyn. Once born, however—and Mr. Moore has given an account of the birth-pains, irreverent as Sterne's account of the arrival of Tristram Shandy—the theatre quickly grew into something of account. The London actors returned to grace their native stage, and their places were taken by young people, Dublin born, who worked by day in shops and offices, and had

this great virtue, that they could speak the "new language" of the national drama that, in one way and another, soon came to be written for them. By 1902 the little company was able to pay a visit to the St. George's Hall in London; with such effect, that in a single night the Irish peasant of Boucicault, and of universal English acceptance, with his pipe in his hat and his shillelagh and his vocabulary of faix-bedad-at all-at all, was destroyed for ever. The dramatists at this time were Mr. Yeats, whose Cathleen-ni-Houlihan was a genuinely dramatic little play of real national character; and Lady Gregory. For two years after this the company still performed in Dublin in halls of one sort or another; and for presentation in one of these the first plays of J. M. Synge were written.

The third of his plays was performed in a theatre. The Abbey Theatre, converted from a corn-store, in the centre of the city, is a genuine theatre, although possessing a certain conscious remoteness from the upholstered and gilt temples where sacrifice is made to the goddess of the Box Office; it seats some five or six hundred, and is fully equipped with all necessary matters of the stage. This is the theatre for which J. M. Synge worked, getting no money in his lifetime from the performance of his plays. He was a thorough man of the theatre, happy in its activi-

ties, incessant in rehearsal, and in teaching the actors with his own lips the long, peculiar rhythm of the speech of the plays. By the time *The Playboy of the Western World* was presented, it is probable that the Abbey Theatre in Dublin was the best theatre—the theatre possessing in the highest perfection all the essentials of its art—in the English-speaking world.

iv

The best portrait of the man—the portrait that seems to show most of the author of the plays—hangs in the new Municipal Gallery at Dublin.[1] It shows a homely Irish face, gallicized just a little deliberately; with features that are insignificant, save for remarkable eyes. The black hair is in a careless sweep, the attire negligent but determinedly ordinary. The hands are the delicate hands of the craftsman. You come back to the eyes—eyes that assert nothing, that begin by questioning your assertions merely, that hold you under their calm, amused gaze, a gaze tolerant and a little cynical. They are curiously wide eyes, lidded a little lazily. . . . As you look, the impartial gaze appears to have shifted; it is beyond you, on the things of eternal concern.

[1] By Mr. J. B. Yeats, R.H.A., reproduced as frontispiece.

The portrait shows Synge "sitting still," as he said: Mr. Masefield found him so, in a roomful of people in London, the least conspicuous of the company; "watching with the singular grave intensity with which he watched life." Another good portrait shows him sitting, watching, at rehearsal. "His mind was too busy with the life to be busy with the affairs or the criticism of life."[1] "All wild sights appealed to Synge, he did not care whether they were typical of anything else or had any symbolical meaning at all. If he had lived in the days of piracy he would have been the fiddler in a pirate-schooner, him they called 'the music.' 'The music' looked on at everything with dancing eyes but drew no sword."[2] "He was a solitary, undemonstrative man, never asking pity, nor complaining, nor seeking sympathy . . . all folded up in brooding intellect, knowing nothing of new books and newspapers, reading the great masters alone."[3] Mr. Masefield finds the man in the Poems, Mr. Yeats in the unarranged, unspeculating pages of the book on the Aran Islands. In the chapters that follow, our more particular concern will be with the plays, to find the dramatist there.

[1] Mr. Masefield. [2] Mr. Jack B. Yeats. [3] Mr. W. B. Yeats.

V

Mr. Yeats has expressed the doubt whether Synge would ever have written at all had he not chanced to re-discover Ireland. Perhaps there is the pardonable pride of the friend in this, who has seen his counsel bear fruit; but one need not think so. Certainly Synge came back to life, from letters, with pleasure and excitement. It would be hard to find a parallel in literature to the suddenness with which the world was simplified and illumined for this silent, contemplative man, conscious from the first of the wish to be a writer, and until past his thirtieth year achieving nothing. The little impressionist essays he had to show in Paris seemed to Mr. Yeats pale and remote from life "as images reflected from mirror to mirror." He had put nothing into them of the spirit of the circuses on the outer Boulevards, that he took pleasure in watching. Like Goldsmith, he had wandered over a lot of Europe, living in close touch with its people; they had not moved him to make drama. He had passed places, when travelling by night in France or Bavaria, "that seemed so enshrined in the blue silence of night one could not believe they reawaken"; their beauty had not stirred in him the means to its expression. Enormous mobs

in Rome or Paris did not make him feel the tension of human excitement he felt, he writes, when he came among an insignificant crowd in Connaught. Something in Ireland fired him: something in Wicklow, in the "grey and wintry sides" of its many glens; something in the islands of the West, "filled with people whose lives have the strange quality that is found in the oldest poetry and legend." His mind and temperament and preparation were like a train well laid, waiting only for a spark to fire it; something in the life he found in Ireland supplied this spark—he cannot himself define it. We find him writing in his journal:

I got on a long road running through a bog, with a smooth mountain on one side and the sea on the other, and Brandon in front of me, partly covered with clouds. As far as I could see there were little groups of people on their way to the chapel in Ballyferriter, the men in homespun and the women wearing blue cloaks, or, more often, black shawls twisted over their heads. This procession along the olive bogs, between the mountains and the sea, on this grey day of autumn, seemed to wring me with the pang of emotion one meets everywhere in Ireland—an emotion that is partly local and patriotic, and partly a share of the desolation that is mixed everywhere with the supreme beauty of the world.

"The intense insular clearness one sees only in Ireland," he notes again; and it was Ireland that brought clearness to his own mind, always

given to musing, and up to now a little dark. Henceforward he was on the roads a great deal, with those olive bogs of the West for background to his thoughts; and for part of each year he made his home on Aran, among "the men who live forgotten in those worlds of mist," giving his whole care and concern to the daily trifles of their life, and speaking their curiously simple yet dignified language. Here, among people filled with the oldest passions of the world, life took on an intensity of clearness that made of Synge a dramatist. Here there came to him the mood, "in which we realise with immense distress the short moment we have left us to experience all the wonder and beauty of the world." It is the mood of all Synge's work, the mood of passion and tenderness we shall find in one after another of the plays.

Synge did not merely find Ireland, he came back to it. To see life with new eyes is a good motive to art; but to see a well-known and well-loved life with a new and vivid intensity after absence, is perhaps a better. Synge's was no passing mood, with motivity in it to an ode on Ireland Revisited. He knew that his mind had ended its wanderings, and his imagination entered into its kingdom. No writer has seen Ireland with such intimacy at the same time with such detachment. The plays of no drama-

tist present so over-powering a vision of general reality. In his first play, is it fanciful to think we may hear Synge speaking in the words of the blind beggar whose eyes have found light? "I'm thinking by the mercy of God," says he, "it's few sees anything but them is blind for a space." For the sudden intense glory with which life illumined itself for Synge was the motive to his art, as it is the cue to its understanding.

II

THE PLAYS

For performance in Dublin between 1903 and 1909, J. M. Synge wrote six plays. Three, *The Well of the Saints*, *The Playboy of the Western World* and *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, are in three acts; two, *Riders to the Sea* and *In the Shadow of the Glen*, are one-act plays. A play in two acts, *The Tinker's Wedding*, has not yet been performed in Dublin, but after Synge's death was seen in London. The play we may regard as Synge's earliest—although not the first to be seen on the stage—is *The Well of the Saints*.

ii

One or more centuries ago, a saint, going his round through the churches of Ireland with a long cloak on him and naked feet, came from the west into the east, and brought with him, slung at his side, a sup of water from across a bit of the sea where there was an island and

a well and the grave of the four beautiful saints. The play opens at a cross-roads near by a Wicklow village, and a church; and here, seated that the people may see them who are passing to the fair, are Martin Doul and Mary Doul, a pair of blind and weather-beaten beggars. Through their ears, sharpened to the smallest sounds of the warm country-side, to the nicest distinctions in temper of Timmy the smith breathing in his forge and Molly Byrne walking and swinging her legs upon the road, we hear of the approach of the Saint, to do a wonder and to bring seeing to the blind. At first Martin Doul and Mary Doul will have none of his wonders, when Timmy and Molly and the others bring them the news; for they are wonder enough themselves, with a right to the crossing of the roads, and a great contempt for the seeing rabble. Mary Doul, however, is overawed that a saint, a fine saint, should come walking to her; and Martin Doul is worked upon by a desire to look upon his wife, a woman he has heard called the wonder of the western world. The Saint cures them; we hear the voice of Martin Doul crying out that he sees the walls of the church and the green bits of ferns in them, and the Saint, and the great width of the sky. He runs in half-foolish with joy, and sees Molly Byrne, with her grand hair and

soft skin and eyes, sitting in Mary Doul's seat. When Molly makes game of him, and the people laugh, he goes from one young girl to another, and the people laugh louder; then he turns to face Mary Doul coming from the church with her sight cured also. They stare blankly at one another. . . .

The Saint is seen in the church-door with his head bent in prayer. "Let me hit her one good one, for the love of Almighty God," cries Martin Doul, "and I'll be quiet after till I die." The Saint rebukes them, urges them to look not upon their two pitiful selves but upon the splendour of the spirit of God, and goes on to where there are a deaf woman, and two men without sense, and children blind from their birth.

When the curtain rises again, it is to show the village roadside, with Martin Doul at the door of the forge, working for Timmy the smith—working hard, according to his thinking, and getting less than when he was sitting blinded at the cross-road. Martin Doul, indeed, is turning against his sight; for now he sees the world for an ugly place and his wife for an ugly woman, instead of seeing all with his mind's eye just as he chose to see it, and himself a wonder into the bargain. The grand day of his life proved but a bad day after all—a bad day for

Martin Doul and for Mary Doul; and, thinks Timmy the smith, for every other person, setting them, as it has, "talking of nothing, and thinking of nothing, but the way they do be looking in the face." But if Martin Doul is not the wonder he was, he is still a wonder; for it is few, he is thinking, that see anything, but those that have been blind for a space. Under the nose of Timmy, he tries to tempt away Molly Byrne; for the reason that only himself has fit eyes to look on her beauty, and not a man who has been looking out a long while on the bad days of the world. Molly is half-amused and half-mesmerized for a moment; then turns from him, and puts shame upon him before the smith and Mary Doul. Once more Mary Doul and Martin Doul face one another. But he cannot see her clearly, and he appeals to her frantically to know whether it is the darkness of thunder, or are they both dimming again? She hits him with an empty sack across the face, and goes off; Timmy and Molly go together into the forge; and we leave Martin Doul turning to grope out, with hell's long curse on his tongue.

When the third act opens, Martin Doul and Mary Doul are blind again, sitting back at the cross-road relishing an early spring day in the sounds of all the little things that are stirring. Sight is a queer thing for upsetting a man, is

Martin Doul's conclusion. They can no longer think themselves beautiful; but there is great consolation in the thought that the hair Mary Doul has seen reflected in the pools will be white in a short while, and then she will have a face that will be a great wonder, with the soft white hair falling around it. And Martin Doul will be letting his beard grow, a beautiful, long, white, silken, streamy beard. There will be a fine warmth soon in the sun, and a sweetness in the air. They listen to the fine stir of the bleating lambs and the laying hens a mile off on the face of the hill. . . . To them, listening, comes a faint sound of a bell. It is the old Saint returning! In despair, they grope into a gap in the hedge; for what good will their grey hairs be themselves, if they have their sight, and see them falling each day, and turning dirty in the rain? The Saint comes in; and with him Timmy and Molly to be married, with kind hearts for the thought of Martin Doul and Mary Doul sitting dark again, after seeing awhile and working for their bread. Those the Saint cures a second time go on seeing till the hour of death.

SAINT. Kneel down, I'm saying, the ground's dry at your feet.

MARTIN DOUL (*with distress*). Let you go on your own way, holy father. We're not calling you at all.

SAINT. I'm not saying a word of penance, or fasting itself, for I'm thinking the Lord has brought you great teaching in the blinding of your eyes; so you've no call now to be fearing me, but let you kneel down till I give you your sight.

MARTIN DOUL (*more troubled*). We're not asking our sight, holy father, and let you walk on your own way, and be fasting, or praying, or doing anything that you will, but leave us here in our peace, at the crossing of the roads, for it's best we are this way, and we're not asking to see.

SAINT (*to the People*). Is his mind gone that he's no wish to be cured this day, or to be living or working, or looking on the wonders of the world?

MARTIN DOUL. It's wonders enough I seen in a short space for the life of one man only.

"There's little use talking with the like of them," is the Saint's conclusion.

Mary Doul, however, is persuaded; and Martin Doul, letting himself appear to be, kneels also, and, when the Saint holds up his little can with the water, knocks it rocketing across the stage. If he is a poor dark sinner, he has sharp ears; and if some have a right to be working and sweating like Timmy the smith, or fasting and praying and talking holy talk like the Saint, they themselves have a right to be sitting blind, "hearing a soft wind turning round the little leaves of the spring and feeling the sun, and we not tormenting our souls with the sight of the gray days, and the holy men, and the

dirty feet is trampling the world." For the seeing are not understanding them at all. In this at last the Saint acquiesces; he puts his blessing upon them as they go off the two of them to the towns of the south, and Molly Byrne and Timmy the smith and the people go with the Saint into the church.

iii

"At times during Synge's last illness," Mr. W. B. Yeats has written, "Lady Gregory and I would speak of his work and always find some pleasure in the thought that unlike ourselves, who had made our experiments in public, he would leave to the world nothing to be wished away." There is nothing experimental in *The Well of the Saints*. It is so complete and powerful a play, that one can think only of the experiments which must have preceded it and made it possible; Synge's consideration, perhaps, of Les Aveugles of Maeterlinck, by which he was enabled to secure for the theatre the whole of the tingling sensitiveness of the blind, and to reject the paleness of their humanity as they come from the cold hands of Maeterlinck. Synge's blind people are the "happy and blind"; not the poor imperfect things dependent upon one who can see, tragic in themselves and overwhelmed by tragedy so soon as his support

is withdrawn from them; fit symbols, if you so choose to make them, of a generation of men moving feebly in the dark and stretching out hands for the hand that is denied them. There is nothing for the symbolists in *The Well of the Saints*. Symbolism may be forced upon any work of art: when Mary Doul says, "And what good'll our gray hairs be itself, if we have our sight, the way we'll see them falling each day, and turning dirty in the rain?"—you may think, if you choose, of the superiority of the imaginative life over that of the reason, and find in the remark all that is to be found in the prophetic books of Blake; but Mary Doul and Martin Doul will remain happy, self-sufficient human figures to mock at you for your pains.

Synge came back from ten years spent in close contact with Maeterlinck and Mallarmé and Huysmans, to look on life rather with the eyes of Molière and Rabelais and Villon, and clearest of all with his own. What we shall be better employed in finding in this first play is evidence of Synge's astonishingly certain sense of the theatre; his command of a dialogue apt and pointed for comedy, and capable at the same time of every effect of increased tensity; the racy clearness of the characterization, and the form and finish and personality of the whole work. We may note the excellence and economy of the stage-directions,

as that when Timmy comes with the first news of the wonder to be done, Martin Doul is "amused, but incredulous"—a whole revelation of his character. Timmy is a strong man and a sensible, but blind to many things that Martin Doul is all alive to; so that the bright beauty of Molly Byrne comes less acutely to him than to the sharpened senses of the man who has no eyes to look on her. Molly Byrne is beautiful, but shallow like a little dancing stream. The Saint is a fine saint, but with no humour at all. Of the others, we may note another girl, the Bride, who is hushed a little from Molly's noisiness, and looks out with some reverence for the coming of the Saint—all these are sharp and eager characters, no mere "persons of the play." We may notice too how Mary Doul is clearly distinguished from Martin Doul; sharing his concern to be thought a great wonder, his relish for the little things for the ear and scent, but having no such turn for the men as Martin has for the young girls, and not the half of his bravery or defiance; she going off a little despondingly in the end of all, while he is turned "a likely man" again. Impossible now to speak of them as "two blind, weather-beaten beggars"; they are Martin Doul and Mary Doul, with the great sense of individuality of the Irish peasant, and of all Synge's people.

At the back of all the play hangs that extraordinary atmosphere of reality, imparted, made palpable almost, through the sense of *sound*—of the lambs and hens stirring, little sticks breaking, and the grass moving, not for their own sakes merely, but together creating an illusion of real life behind, of the life of the village, and of the whole of life behind that. Partly this illusion comes to us in this play with the particularity of the blind; but we shall find it in all the work of Synge. A "queerness," if you will; but followed a little further, we shall find this power of Synge's used always in the service of reality. And see the normality of the ending. After the queer distortion of the point of view—"the seeing is a queer lot"—we are left to contemplate marriage for Timmy and Molly, and the daily life of the forge; while the blind pair cease troubling them, and go out to the different joy of tramping the roads. It is an equal triumph; and all sorts, normal and abnormal, have an equal right to live: an equal right to live in art, so that they be not poor things, nor freaks merely. *The Well of the Saints* deals, if you will, with the sorrow of the vanishing of beauty and the irony of fulfilled desire; but it will be well not to make too much of the statement, for Synge, we shall find, "deals with" very little other than the broad passing

of life itself, before watchful, humorous eyes. But when Mary Doul speaks of "setting fools mad a short while, and then to be turning a thing would drive off the little children from your feet," it is a note we shall hear again in the plays. And in all Synge's people there is something of the little children of whom Martin Doul speaks, who "do be listening to the stories of an old woman, and do be dreaming after in the dark night that it's in grand houses of gold they are, with speckled horses to ride, and do be waking again, in a short while, and they destroyed with the cold, and the thatch dripping, maybe, and the starved ass braying in the yard."

iv

Upon three plays, *The Well of the Saints*, *Riders to the Sea*, and *In the Shadow of the Glen*, it is probable that Synge was working at one time; together with a first draft of *The Tinker's Wedding*, which was set aside, however, and not brought to completion until several years later. *In the Shadow of the Glen*[1] was performed some four or five months before *Riders to the Sea;* in the latter play, Synge has gone for his inspiration, we shall find, from the moun-

[1] This play was first performed and printed under the title of *The Shadow of the Glen.* Synge, however, in a note to *The Tinker's Wedding,* writes of the play under the above title; and this seems to be the form that his publishers have finally adopted.

tains and glens of Wicklow to the islands of the West. It will be convenient to treat the Wicklow plays together.

V

In the kitchen of the last cottage at the head of a long glen in County Wicklow, there is a body lying, covered with a sheet, on a bed against the wall. It is the master of the house; his young wife is moving about the room, settling a few things, lighting candles, and looking now and then uneasily at the bed. When a knock comes softly at the door, she hastily takes up a stocking with money from the table and puts it in her pocket. She opens the door; it is a wild night, with rain falling; and she asks the tramp who is knocking for admittance, to come in. He is a young tramp, who brings with him some of the romance of the roads beyond the glen. Over the threshold, he starts at the sight of the bed, and will not put out his hand, when she pulls back a bit of the sheet, to feel whether the body is cold; but he settles down by the fire to a glass of whisky and one of the dead man's pipes. The oppression of the hills is over the two of them, as they speak of the dead: of the old man who was always cold, every day and every night since Nora knew him; and of Patch Darcy, a fine man, who ran up into the back

hills with nothing on him but an old shirt and died mad, to be eaten by the crows. But another young man, a kind of a farmer, has come up now from the sea to live in a cottage beyond; and Nora goes out in the rain to find him, so that he may, she says, go down into the glen and tell the people that the old man is dead.

When the door closes on her the tramp seats himself again and with her needle and thread begins stitching his coat; when, in an instant, the sheet is drawn slowly down and Dan Burke looks out from the bed. The tramp falls back in terror from his stool, and begins to say a prayer for the soul of the dead man; when at once, outside in the night, a long whistle is heard. Then Dan Burke sits right up in his bed and speaks fiercely; he has, says he, a bad wife in the house. The tramp gives him a sup of the whisky, and a heavy stick from the cupboard; then hastily covers the old man over again, for there is a voice on the path. The tramp goes back to his stitching; Nora comes in with Michael Dara, the young herd. The two of them settle to tea-drinking, and speak of Patch Darcy and the lonesome life it has been for Nora with nobody but the old man, in the long nights and the long days; "when you do be sitting looking out from a door the like of that door, and seeing nothing but the mists rolling

down the bog, and the mists again and they rolling up the bog, and hearing nothing but the wind crying out in the bits of broken trees were left from the great storm, and the streams roaring with the rain." She will not be talking that way, however, when she marries a young man now; they will have nothing they will be afraid to let their minds on when the mist is down. If it is a lonesome place, Michael Dara is thinking it is a good sum the old man has left behind. Michael has his arm round Nora by now; and we see Dan Burke sit up noiselessly in his bed. . . . Dan sneezes violently. Michael jumps for the door, but Dan, in his queer white clothes, is there before him. Nora turns slowly to the tramp with the stifled question, "Is it dead he is or living?" Then Dan orders her from the house, and the tramp speaks up for Nora; while Michael contributes the suggestion that there is a fine Union below in Rathdrum. She answers Dan fiercely, then plaintively; and then the tramp breaks in with the joys of the road, for he knows all the ways a man can put food in his mouth.

TRAMP (*at the door*). Come along with me now, lady of the house, and it's not my blather you'll be hearing only, but you'll be hearing the herons crying out over the black lakes, and you'll be hearing the grouse and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm; and it's not from the like of them you'll be

hearing a tale of getting old like Peggy Cavanagh, and losing the hair off you, and the light of your eyes, but it's fine songs you'll be hearing when the sun goes up, and there'll be no old fellow wheezing, the like of a sick sheep, close to your ear.

NORA. I'm thinking it's myself will be wheezing that time with lying down under the Heavens when the night is cold; but you've a fine bit of talk, stranger, and it's with yourself I'll go. (*She goes towards the door, then turns to Dan.*) You think it's a grand thing you're after doing with your letting on to be dead, but what is it at all? What way would a woman live in a lonesome place the like of this place, and she not making a talk with the men passing? And what way will yourself live from this day, with none to care you? What is it you'll have now but a black life, Daniel Burke? and it's not long, I'm telling you, till you'll be lying again under that sheet, and you dead surely.

[*She goes out with the tramp.*

And Dan and Michael have peace for their drinks.

vi

There is no one-act play in the language for compression, for humanity, and for perfection of form, to put near *In the Shadow of the Glen.* From the moment of the rise of the curtain on that little Wicklow interior, to its fall—about half an hour—we are let into the lives of three people, and the life and death of a fourth. It is a selected half-hour, that marches moment by

moment with true occurrence, and yet opens out into years that have passed and years that are to come.

A typical half-hour, then, for purposes of drama; one of life's supreme moments, in which character becomes concrete in action, and from which, as though from a high tableland, retrospect and prospect in equal streams flow down and away in the plains. Synge spoke poorly of Ibsen, but chiefly for his contentment with joyless and pallid words; outside Ibsen, perhaps we may say outside Rosmersholm, there is no match for the way in which the past is summarised for us while a group of people move and speak, with a perfectly natural regard for present truth, before our eyes. Ibsen's people and Synge's people, indeed the people of all good dramatists, move and speak with a heightened significance in every word and gesture, because of this elevation upon which they stand for their short traffic of the stage. It is the reason why Maeterlinck's people for ever live as though in a room into which we look through a window with the Old Man in L'Intérieur; but Synge's people do not appear unnaturally strange and solemn, like Maeterlinck's, only extraordinarily arresting and important; and Synge, unlike Ibsen in Rosmersholm, has only a few lines, and not four acts, in which to resume their

past. Every line, therefore, must speak of their past, must reveal their character in the present, and must point us forward; and all this with perfect deference to reality.

Impossible, you would say, that a story of how a rather comic old man shammed to be dead in order to spy upon his young wife, and how he turned her out of doors with a tramp, should reach the heights of tragic intensity! Before you have been five minutes looking into that Wicklow interior, the dramatist will have his spell upon you. Nor is it the calm spell of a Dutch genre picture; the uneasy movements of Nora about the room, her look over her shoulder at the bed, the little soft knock coming at the door, these things, before a word is spoken, are contributing to your mood of expectant fear. The surprised start of the tramp is yours; as he lights his pipe, there is great virtue in that sharp light beneath his haggard face; their tone in the talk about Patch Darcy is telling you Nora's story, but it is doing more also. You laugh, maybe, as the tramp falls back in terror from his chair, but laughter is soon caught at the throat by deeper feeling; this old man in his bed is no merely funny figure. Sharp upon his rising comes the long whistle in the wild night outside; sharp again upon that, the sound of Nora and the

young man on the path. It is a heart-wringing thing to see Nora sitting at the table speaking out the sorrows of childlessness, and lonesomeness, and of beauty passing, to the chink of the coins she is counting and putting without care into little heaps, while the young man is taking them and counting them again and thinking not at all of what she is saying, but only that it is a good sum the old man has left behind. Between the three men she sits—the old, cold man she thinks to be dead; the innocent, worthless young man she will marry (for what way would she live if she didn't?); the young tramp, about whom we know little, who still sits there in the half light, piquing our interest. It is to him she turns, after that dreadful moment when the sight of Dan Burke stifles all words in her throat; then a half turn, no more, to Michael Dara; then, when at last she moves to face her husband, "passion propels her like a screw."[1] It is inevitable that she should go out with the Tramp; he is the best man of them, as fine a man maybe as Patch Darcy, that fine man turned "queer," whose queerness is there to be felt behind all the play. This feeling is nothing decadent or morbid, merely the sense of the sorrow of life passing without fulfilment; of

[1] C. E. Montague, in the best criticism of the acting of Synge's plays (In *Dramatic Values*).

sitting alone, and hearing the winds crying, and not knowing on what thing your mind would stay. Those who do not feel this sorrow, are left to sit down to a long life and a quiet life, and good health with it, and to a little taste of the stuff. Perhaps the Tramp speaks for Synge when he slowly says, " It's true, surely, and the Lord have mercy on us all."

vii

Riders to the Sea is set in an island off the West of Ireland. The scene is again a cottage kitchen; but here there are nets and oilskins upon the wall, and by the fire is the primitive pot-oven, for we have moved to one of the outposts of the older life in Europe. Here men's fear is of the sea, from which alone they may snatch a livelihood. Standing by the wall are some new white boards; for there is sorrow upon this house.

The old woman of the house is lying down within; Cathleen, a girl of about twenty, finishes kneading a cake, puts it down in the pot-oven, wipes her hands, and begins to spin at the wheel; then Nora, a younger girl, comes softly in at the door. She has a bundle under her shawl; when she sees that the old woman is not in the kitchen, she takes it out: it is a shirt and a plain stocking, got off a

drowned man. Are they Michael's? If they are Michael's, then the girls, the young priest has said, are to tell their mother that he's got a clean burial, by the grace of God; if not, then let no one say a word about them, for Maurya will cry and lament for the son of another woman, and hasn't she been crying and keening nine days for Michael, and making great sorrow in the house? They hear the old woman moving about on the bed; Cathleen puts the ladder against the gable of the chimney, and hides the bundle in the turf-loft. Maurya comes from the inner room, and seats herself on a stool at the fire, complaining querulously that they should be getting more turf. There is a cake baking at the fire for Bartley, says Cathleen; he will want it when the tide turns and he goes to the fair on the mainland, if the sea by the white rocks should not be too bad for the hooker to go when the tide has turned to the wind. A gust blew the door open after Nora came in; now Bartley comes, hurriedly and quietly, and makes his preparations to be off. He will ride down to the sea on the red mare, and the grey pony shall run behind him. It will be a good fair for horses, they are saying below; this is the one boat for two weeks or more, and they will be hard set from now with only the one man left to work. With

the blessing of God on them, Bartley goes; but Maurya, her old woman's sorrow become a grievance with her saying it over, will not give him her blessing. The girls send her after him with the forgotten cake; she may go down by the short way to the spring well, and give it to him as he passes, and with it her blessing also. The moment she is gone, the girls get down the bundle from the loft.

NORA (*who has taken up the stocking and counted the stitches, crying out*). It's Michael, Cathleen, it's Michael; God spare his soul, and what will herself say when she hears this story, and Bartley on the sea?

CATHLEEN (*taking the stocking*). It's a plain stocking.

NORA. It's the second one of the third pair I knitted, and I put up three-score stitches, and I dropped four of them.

CATHLEEN (*counts the stitches*). It's that number is in it. (*Crying out*). Ah, Nora, isn't it a bitter thing to think of him floating that way to the far north, and no one to keen him but the black hags that do be flying on the sea?

NORA (*swinging herself half round, and throwing out her arms on the clothes*). And isn't it a pitiful thing when there is nothing left of a man who was a great rower and fisher but a bit of an old shirt and a plain stocking?

CATHLEEN (*after an instant*). Tell me is herself coming, Nora? I hear a little sound on the path.

They slip the shirt and the stocking into a hole in the chimney corner; and Maurya

comes in, very slowly, with the cake still in her hand. She crosses to the fire without saying a word and begins to keen softly. Has she not seen Bartley? She has seen the fearfullest thing. She stood at the spring well, and Bartley came first on the red mare, and she tried to give him Godspeed, but something choked the words in her throat, and she looked up then at the grey pony, and there was Michael upon it—with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet. . . . Through the half-open door behind them the girls hear a noise: someone is crying out by the seashore. Maurya continues her lament without hearing anything: her lament for the husband, and the husband's father, and the six fine sons; some of whom were found, and some of whom were not found—gone now, the lot of them. She pauses, and the door opens softly, and old women begin to come in; crossing themselves on the threshold, and kneeling down in front of the stage with red petticoats over their heads.

CATHLEEN. It's Michael, God spare him, for they're after sending us a bit of his clothes from the far north.

[*She reaches out and hands Maurya the clothes that belonged to Michael. Maurya stands up slowly, and takes them in her hands. Nora looks out.*]

NORA. They're carrying a thing among them, and there's water dripping out of it and leaving a track by the big stones.

CATHLEEN (*in a whisper to the women who have come in*). Is it Bartley it is?

ONE OF THE WOMEN. It is, surely, God rest His soul.

[*Two younger women come in and pull out the table. Then men carry in the body of Bartley, laid on a plank, with a bit of a sail over it, and lay it on the table.*]

CATHLEEN (*to the women as they are doing so*). What way was he drowned?

ONE OF THE WOMEN. The grey pony knocked him over into the sea, and he was washed out where there is a great surf on the white rocks.

Maurya spreads out the pieces of Michael's clothes beside the body, and sprinkles them with Holy Water. Then she puts the empty cup mouth downwards on the table, and lays her hands together on Bartley's feet. They are all together now, and the end is come. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. "No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied."

viii

Going to that "wet rock in the Atlantic," where he found a life "almost patriarchal," Synge yet found a tragedy more instant, perhaps, in its appeal to the big world than any other of his plays. "In the big world," says the old mother, when she goes out leaning upon the stick of the son whose dead body has

already been found, to bid farewell to the last of her sons, "In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old." More than most of the great tragedies, this tragedy is localized; to the place where it is the life of a young man to be going on the sea, and the life of an old woman to be down looking by the sea for the son whom the sea has taken; localized down very plainly to the island of Inismaan, for when the young girls watch the old woman go, "Is she gone round by the bush?" they say—a bush being a thing of note on this forgotten island, where men thrash out upon the rocks the wheat they have "reaped with knives because of the stones."

When Shelley wrote a tragedy around the pitiful fate of the daughter of an incestuous tyrant, it failed of its full effect; just as the incestuous and beautiful tragedies of Webster did not keep their hold—because incest is not a very general motive to tragedy: whereas the agony of mind of Sophocles' hero who married with his mother moves us still—although none of us is likely to come to the same predicament—for the reason that it goes very much wider than its merely local cause, and speaks to us of the mental agony which is man's when he slowly finds

himself the plaything of tragic circumstance. *Riders to the Sea*, the most Greek of Synge's plays, in the immensity of its issues, in the high tableland chosen for their presentment, makes an appeal, despite its own localization, just so universal. "If it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses, you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?"—In what degree is that cry local to the middle island of Aran? "And isn't it a pitiful thing when there is nothing left of a man who was a great rower and fisher but a bit of an old shirt and a plain stocking?" It is the very epitome of pity; the archetype of all good tragedy. It follows that this play of Synge's has been everywhere the first to be recognized; to gain its place in the theatre, one is told, from Melbourne to Buda-Pesth.

And yet *Riders to the Sea* is not so perfect a masterpiece in one-act as we have seen *In the Shadow of the Glen* to be. The reason we shall see in a minute. The language is again perfect in its aptness to the dramatic intention. The rhythm is now not long and meditative, only checked for a moment of ecstasy or quick decision, like a break in the mist rolling over the hills; it is checked constantly and in terminations more abrupt, almost as though each sentence were snatched from the

lips of its speaker by the rising wind, servant of the inappeasable sea. The progress is swifter, partly for the reason that there is less to be revealed by the dialogue. Nora's tragedy was rather that of a particular woman left to think thoughts in the dark mist; here the tragedy is the common lot, and is less dependent, therefore, upon character. It is given swiftness also by the marvellous intensity Synge has given it; the temper of the play is like a white flame, in which everything that is irrelevant, or ordinarily below this terrible significance, has been burned up.

Look at the importance, from the opening words, with which the shirt and plain stocking, the white rocks and the tide, the pig with the black feet and the bit of new rope, are invested: the shirt and stocking that are all that are left of one son, the white rocks and tide that are to destroy another, the pig with the black feet that must be sold to the jobber by a woman now the last son has gone, and the rope that will surely be wanted to lower Bartley into his deep grave. The fine white boards bought for a big price in Connemara take on a visual significance almost intolerable as they stand against the kitchen wall. Synge never wrote a play—never, surely, has a play been written—in which such a complete intensification of

the dramatist's materials is achieved. And yet with this flaming momentum upon it, Synge has put into the play the little humorous touches of the pig eating the rope, of the girl's impatience with the old woman's grieving, of her greater fondness for the one son than for the other, of her not thinking of the nails with all the coffins she had seen made already; the play, in all its swiftness, is packed with humanity.

It is this very swiftness which is the cause of the structural defect in *Riders to the Sea;* its action does not succeed, like that of the former play, in advancing step by step with reality, for in its half hour's occupation of the stage we are asked to suppose that Bartley should be knocked over into the sea, and washed out where there is a great surf on the white rocks, and his body recovered, and brought back again; when he himself allows for half an hour to ride down only. This unreality is an undeniable difficulty in the theatre; and the keening women, serving at once as messengers and chorus on a Greek convention a little difficult to us of acceptability, are another. A tragic intensity which on the printed page is sublime somehow does not, without reduction, bear this visual embodiment. It may even be that here we are up against the natural limitations of the

theatre. At all events, if *Riders to the Sea*, beautiful and moving play as it is, be better in the library than the theatre, then, by that very fact, its readier popularity notwithstanding, it is not the most perfect of Synge's plays.

An Extract from:
J.M. Synge — Howe.

III

THE PLAYS (*Continued*)

THE three plays we have considered were performed and printed between the end of 1903 and the beginning of 1905. Two years elapse before the second group of three plays opens with *The Playboy of the Western World.* In these two years, Synge continued to live in real and increasing intimacy with the "fine people" to whose imagination he acknowledged how much he owed in a preface to this play—"a popular imagination that is fiery, and magnificent, and tender." *The Playboy of the Western World* brought to the contemporary stage the most rich and copious store of character since Shakespeare.

ii

The action is still in the west, near a village on a wild coast of Mayo. In a rough shebeen, or wayside public-house, a wild-looking but fine girl, Pegeen, the daughter of the publican, is

sitting writing the orders to the neighbouring town, for porter, for six yards of yellow stuff, and for sundries that are suited for a wedding-day. Outside one may fancy the cows breathing and sighing in the stillness of the air, and not a step moving, save up at the cross-roads where Michael James is meeting a couple more who are going along with him to celebrate a wake across the sands. To Pegeen comes Shawn Keogh, a fat and fair young man betrothed to marry her, and awaiting only Father Reilly's dispensation; after him comes Michael James, followed by Philly Cullen and Jimmy Farrell; and they speak of a kind of fellow above in the furzy ditch, groaning and going mad or getting his death. Pegeen works herself up into a great state, that she should be asked to stay alone in the shop, without so much as a pot-boy, while her father quits off for the whole night; and Shawn, the Christian man, when it is proposed that he should stay along with her, runs off and leaves his coat in Michael's hands, rather than he should displease Father Reilly. After a moment, back comes Shawn, his terrified face, over the half of the door, white against the dark night. The queer dying fellow is looking over the ditch—is following him now. For a perceptible moment they watch the door; someone coughs outside, then, tired and fright-

ened and dirty, Christy Mahon comes in. He looks a decent lad. He is too miserable, as he sits with his glass by the fire, to feel that they are staring at him with curiosity; he has no thought of pride in the deed for which he is wanting, until their evident delight in the mystery flatters him into the belief that maybe he has done something big. It is not, however, the delighted curiosity of them all, it is not the aspersion of Pegeen Mike that he has done nothing at all, that brings him to the avowal; it is Pegeen's mock rage and her threat to knock the head of him with a broom.

PEGEEN (*coming from counter*). He's done nothing, so. (*To Christy.*) If you didn't commit murder or a bad, nasty thing; or false coining, or robbery, or butchery, or the like of them, there isn't anything that would be worth your troubling for to run from now. You did nothing at all.

CHRISTY (*his feelings hurt*). That's an unkindly thing to be saying to a poor orphaned traveller, has a prison behind him, and hanging before, and hell's gap gaping below.

PEGEEN (*with a sign to the men to be quiet*). You're only saying it. You did nothing at all. A soft lad the like of you wouldn't slit the windpipe of a screeching sow.

CHRISTY (*offended*). You're not speaking the truth.

PEGEEN (*in mock rage*). Not speaking the truth, is it? Would you have me knock the head of you with the butt of the broom?

CHRISTY (*twisting round on her with a sharp cry of*

horror). Don't strike me. I killed my poor father, Tuesday was a week, for doing the like of that.

PEGEEN (*with blank amazement*). Is it killed your father?

CHRISTY (*subsiding*). With the help of God I did, surely, and that the Holy Immaculate Mother may intercede for his soul.

PHILLY (*retreating with Jimmy*). There's a daring fellow.

JIMMY. Oh, glory be to God!

MICHAEL (*with great respect*). That was a hanging crime, mister honey. You should have had good reason for doing the like of that.

The great respect of the men steadies Christy, and sets him considering; the swift and sudden championship of Pegeen swells him with surprise and triumph, and embarks him on a gallous story of how he hit his tyrant of a father with a "loy," a story full of picturesque self-justification. He would surely have the sense of Solomon for a pot-boy. Now Pegeen will be safe indeed, with a man that killed his father holding danger from the door. The men, with the blessing of God upon him, go off to the wake, and Christy and Pegeen are left together. He expands in her presence, under her delightful curiosity; we may watch him expand moment by moment as she busies herself about his wants; he is still very naïve, but her assurance that the poets are his like—"fine fiery fellows with great rages when their temper's roused"—gives him final confidence in his deed as a meritorious

emancipation from the naked parish where he grew a man. Then someone knocks, and he clings to Pegeen in a sudden terror. When it is only the Widow Quin who comes in, Christy shrinks shyly from her half-amused curiosity. Father Reilly and Shawn Keogh have sent her to divide the pair; but Pegeen is short and fierce with the widow. The kindness of Pegeen, and her flattering sense of ownership in him, have so worked upon Christy by the fall of the first curtain that we leave him in perfect honesty[1] thinking that he was a foolish fellow not to have killed his father in the years gone by.

In the morning Christy wakes bright and cheerful and fairly reassured, to a consciousness of the material advantages earned for him by the blow of a spade. When all sorts begin to bring him their food and clothing, he is meek and shy at first, with the young girls and the Widow Quin; but his story, which he tells better than ever, goes splendidly. Pegeen, after a moment of severity with him because of his leaguing with the girls (which he takes bitterly and grimly rather than in the abject spirit he would have taken it the night before), is able to reassure him that there is no word out about his murder; and when

[1] Note particularly the development of this first act. The deliberate distortion to which this play has been subjected, by political and other persons, is amazing; and it has even suffered some misrepresentation on the stage.

Shawn brings him his new suit and the half of a ticket for the Western States, Christy is perfectly ready to make the best of the one and to scorn the other. The only hope for Shawn now looks to be that the Widow Quin should marry Christy. Natty and swaggering in his new suit, he feels quite sincerely the gallant orphan who cleft his father with one blow to the breeches belt. Just as sincere his wild terror, when there appears in the doorway his murdered father's walking spirit; just as sincere his own half-articulate despair and rage, when he looks out and sees Old Mahon crossing the sands, and wishes that the Lord God would send a high wave to wash him from the world. Christy's terror, however, is no longer of the consequences of his own act (as it was last night); his fear now is lest the father whom he evidently did not kill should come to spoil his new-won reputation as the only playboy of the Western World. The Widow Quin has fooled Old Mahon, while Christy, behind the door, looked out like a hare through a gap; and it has amused her greatly. But when Christy curses, or when Christy prays for aid to win Pegeen, then even the Widow Quin has to confess that Christy is a poet, and not a murderous little rascal only.

When the curtain rises on the third act, just a little later in the same day, Christy, thanks to

the contriving of the Widow Quin, is once more mounted on the spring-tide of the stars of luck. We hear of his great success in the sports they are holding on the sands below; then Pegeen brings him in triumphant with his prizes, and hustles the crowd out, and sits down radiant, to wipe the sweat from his face with her shawl.

CHRISTY (*looking at her with delight*). I'll have great times if I win the crowning prize I'm seeking now, and that's your promise that you'll wed me in a fortnight, when our banns is called.

PEGEEN (*backing away from him*). You've right daring to go ask me that, when all knows you'll be starting to some girl in your own townland, when your father's rotten in four months, or five.

CHRISTY (*indignantly*). Starting from you, is it? I will not, then, and when the airs is warming, in four months or five, it's then yourself and me should be pacing Neifin in the dews of night, the times sweet smells do be rising, and you'd see a little, shiny new moon, maybe, sinking on the hills.

PEGEEN (*looking at him playfully*). And it's that kind of a poacher's love you'd make, Christy Mahon, on the sides of Neifin, when the night is down?

CHRISTY. It's little you'll think if my love's a poacher's, or an earl's itself, when you'll feel my two hands stretched around you, and I squeezing kisses on your puckered lips, till I'd feel a kind of pity for the Lord God is all ages sitting lonesome in His golden chair.

PEGEEN. That'll be right fun, Christy Mahon, and any

girl would walk her heart out before she'd meet a young man was your like for eloquence, or talk at all.

Then she adds, "But we're only talking, maybe." . . . Michael James comes in, supported in his weight of drink by the faithful Shawn. The consent of Michael drunk is soon obtained.

MICHAEL (*standing up in the centre, holding on to both of them*). It's the will of God, I'm thinking, that all should win an easy or a cruel end, and it's the will of God that all should rear up lengthy families for the nurture of the earth. What's a single man, I ask you, eating a bit in one house and drinking a sup in another, and he with no place of his own, like an old braying jackass strayed upon the rocks? (*To Christy.*) It's many would be in dread to bring your like into their house for to end them, maybe, with a sudden end; but I'm a decent man of Ireland, and I liefer face the grave untimely and I seeing a score of grandsons growing up little gallant swearers by the name of God, than go peopling my bedside with puny weeds the like of what you'd breed, I'm thinking, out of Shaneen Keogh. (*He joins their hands.*) A daring fellow is the jewel of the world, and a man did split his father's middle with a single clout should have the bravery of ten, so may God and Mary and St. Patrick bless you, and increase you from this mortal day.

CHRISTY and PEGEEN. Amen, O Lord!

[*Hubbub outside. Old Mahon rushes in, followed by all the crowd, and Widow Quin. He makes a rush at Christy, knocks him down, and begins to beat him.*]

PEGEEN (*dragging back his arm*). Stop that, will you? Who are you at all?

MAHON. His father, God forgive me!

PEGEEN (*drawing back*). Is it rose from the dead?

MAHON. Do you think I look so easy quenched with the tap of a loy?

[*Beats Christy again.*]

PEGEEN (*glaring at Christy*). And it's lies you told, letting on you had him slitted, and you nothing at all.

It is Pegeen's tragedy. . . . Christy, like a poet, thinks it is his; and after he has done his best to quench his father with a second blow of a loy, he thinks, poor fool, she will be giving him praises, the same as in the hours gone by. But Pegeen has learnt her lesson; the playboy whom she has been lacing in her heartstrings is only talk indeed. Old Mahon may come in again to be killed a third time, and, seeing Christy bound, and the others busy burning his leg with a sod of turf, may stand up for his son; they may go off together to tell stories of the villainy of Mayo, with Christy turned a likely gaffer in the end of all, while the men return to their drinks; but the curtain will fall upon the grief of Pegeen for an only playboy lost.

iii

With *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge placed himself amongst the masters.

There are weaknesses in its design, but none in its composition; he employed a canvas larger by very much than he chose before or after; when he came to attempt high tragedy—high but no higher, because its subject was a queen, than the love and sorrows of Pegeen Mike—he failed to work all in because of death. *The Playboy* remains, rich and copious in speech and character; and yet with none of the faults of copiousness. Through it all runs the firm clear strand of tragedy; each with fine qualities goes his and her way; the tragedy, for Pegeen, is that the ways are not together. The stimulus of fine tragedy is in it, because each has got self-realization in the end of all. The assumption of the commonplace people, as they settle to their drinks, is that all is as it was; but it is not so; we—and they—have seen a tragedy enacted, and are the richer by the experience that has deepened two human souls.

A tragedy and a comedy, and yet not two plays but one. Nor has Synge at any moment made the mistake of the lesser dramatist, and put a divided claim on our emotion—on this side of the stage an occasion for laughter, on that a thing to bring us near to tears; rather, with Shakespeare's great unifying touch, he has made a mingled yarn of both together. *The*

Playboy in the theatre is not a play at which one greatly laughs: it is a separation out from life of certain only of its strands that makes most readily for laughter: here an audience, sensitive to fine things, laughs and is hushed, laughs and is hushed again; then goes on in a bubbling appreciation only rarely making itself audible. The people with the deepest capacity to enjoy life do not go through it with the most noise. One thinks, as one sits in the theatre, of Synge's calm clear eyes, reflecting and responsive; with the sudden gleam of laughter, and then the sorrowful look coming in them again.

We may notice in *The Playboy* a good deal more as to Synge's method. First, the characterization: the people are drawn fully rounded; the comfortable stomach of Michael James, with thumbs in waistcoat, is in every word he says, drunk or sober. They are complete living people every one of them, down to Jimmy, "fat and amorous," and Philly, "thin and mistrusting." Consider the Widow Quin: she is as real to us contriving in her little garden, "abroad in the sunshine, darning a stocking or stitching a shift; and odd times again looking out on the schooners, hookers, trawlers is sailing the sea," as she is in her visible contriving for and after Christy on the stage. This is Synge's trick of atmosphere

we have noted already; no trick at all in reality, but the simple consequence of an imagination bathed in all the circumstances of life. The still air beyond the dark door of the wayside shebeen breathes and sighs as Pegeen sits at the table writing; we may be conscious of the queer fellow in the ditch above before ever we hear his cough at the door.

Again, we may notice a new constructive element in all the action, a determined delight in sharp contrasts: Christy speaks of his great strength and bravery, and someone knocks, and he clings fearfully to Pegeen; again, he is the gallant orphan, and is swaggering in his new clothes to find Pegeen, when "Saints of glory!" he cries, and flies wildly to the Widow for protection from the walking spirit of his murdered da. As Philly and Jimmy talk of the Playboy's safety, since his father should be rotten by now, Old Mahon slowly passes the window; to thrust in his own mortified scalp upon their talk of skulls. Christy and Pegeen have no sooner joined hands, and Michael called upon them the blessing of God, than the old man rushes in and knocks Christy down. There is a progression, too, in the humorous situations almost mechanical:— "Are you coming to be killed a third time, or what ails you now?" The love of the wild

and fine, in closest juxtaposition, has grown firmer in Synge; his increased concentration upon what is superb and wild in reality, has come to convincing life in Pegeen, his "wild-looking but fine girl."

At the same time with these contrasts, no characterization, not even that of Nora in the *Shadow of the Glen*, has been subtler. Look at Pegeen, the simple poor girl and fierce aristocrat, snapping the coat away from her father in defence of Shawn, her earliest property; sending him off then to his Father Reilly, so soon as she finds a lad fitter, as she thinks, with his strength and bravery and his poetry talk, to marry with herself; then "mighty huffy" with Christy for his leaguing with the girls, but confessing in a minute that she wouldn't give a thraneen for a lad who hadn't a mighty spirit in him and a gamey heart. How beautiful she is in her radiancy when she gives herself, and how beautiful again in her immediate qualm of dread, lest they are talking only, maybe! Then compare her first unreasoned cry when Old Mahon runs in upon Christy, a cry as terrible as Nora's—in its simple fear—"Is it rose from the dead?"; with what she says next, after a moment for the recovery of her own great pride, and to see in this old tramper the terrible father whom her playboy had destroyed: "To think of the

coaxing glory we had given him, and he after doing nothing but hitting a soft blow and chasing northward in a sweat of fear. Quit off from this." She can bring herself, when all the others are drunk or terrified, to drop the hitch of the rope over his head, and to burn his shin as he lies twisting on the floor; and when he is gone, and her father asks for his peaceful porter, and Shawn comes to her with his fool's assumption that all now will be as it was—only then does she go to the door, and tear the bar from it, and, looking out, give vent to her grief for the playboy she has lost.

Christy, in his progress from the simple innocent poor fellow to the likely gaffer in the end of all, is an equally subtle study; and in all the plays he is the only practising poet. He is not, indeed, a common week-day kind of murderer; and every person in the play, even his father, comes to concede him some of the careless privileges of the artist. His speech is wonderful; the touches by which we are made to perceive the birth and the growth of his confidence in it, not the less so. Lastly we may note the range and suppleness and variety of all the speech in this play; its beauty and vigour, its adaptability to the smallest strokes of observation and of humour. There is a new, a more sweeping rhythm in it, a rhythm broken

by more varied pauses. There has been no dialogue before so apt for comedy as this:

WIDOW QUIN. I'd give the world and all to see the like of him. What kind was he?

MAHON. A small, low fellow.

WIDOW QUIN. And dark?

MAHON. Dark and dirty.

WIDOW QUIN (*considering*). I'm thinking I seen him.

MAHON (*eagerly*). An ugly young blackguard.

WIDOW QUIN. A hideous, fearful villain, and the spit of you.

There is a great pace upon it, as there is upon Molière's; when the four of them look out of window at the racing on the sands below, there is no holding it; we may look on at it, like Christy's mule, kicking the stars. To this fiery dialogue, Synge has wedded a speech full of tenderness and magnificence; in which we may feel the air warming with the spring, scent the sweet smells rising with the dews, and see the little shiny new moon sinking on the hills. The speech of the love passages in this play, this speech is Synge's own; he has brought it, his greatest gift, to the prose drama.

iv

No great play ever had a meaner reception than *The Playboy of the Western World.* Synge was writing immediately for a country in which

politics over-rode the arts. He was not influenced at all by what people said; he took up a smaller, less noble play, on which he had been working at the same time as the Wicklow plays, and he altered it into a less popular form.[1] It has not yet been possible to perform *The Tinker's Wedding* in Ireland. At the time of his death, Synge was working on a play which drew its subject-matter from one of the old high stories of Irish legend; but the people in *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, we shall find, are just as much personally his, and not at all the elevated abstractions demanded by orators and patriots.

V

The Tinker's Wedding has two acts, and the scene of both is a village roadside, with a tinker's fire of sticks burning near the ditch, ragged clothes drying on the hedge, and, in the background, a sort of tent. Michael Byrne is at work by the fire, after nightfall. Sarah Casey, his doxy, comes in full of eagerness that the wedding-ring Michael is working upon should be ready, for she has taken care to pitch their camp near the chapel-gate, so that as the priest passes they will see him, and he may marry herself and Michael, and from this day there

[1] Mr. Yeats, *J. M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time.*

will be no one having the right to call her a dirty name when she is selling cans in Wicklow or Wexford or the city of Dublin. Michael can see nothing in it at all; but Sarah makes talk, in these spring days, of going away from him to the rich tinkers, to be driving always with young Jaunting Jim, who has a grand eye for a woman; and Michael thinks, although moodily, that it may be well to humour her when she asks marriage of him. When the priest comes by, he agrees to marry them for the ten shillings they have, and the gallon can Michael is making. Then they hush, for Mary Byrne, the old mother, comes in tipsy and singing, and she would have them destroyed if she heard this talk of marrying.

When the priest is gone, Sarah and Michael are off after some laying pullets in a neighbouring yard; but first Sarah takes the gallon can from Michael, and ties it up in a piece of sacking from the dews of night, and puts the bundle in the ditch. Left alone, old Mary takes the can from the sacking, and ties up three empty bottles and some straw in its place. "Maybe," she says, "the two of them have a good right to be walking out the little short while they'd be young; but if they have itself, they'll not keep Mary Byrne from her full pint when the night's fine, and there's a dry moon in the sky." She

goes off singing, to drink the proceeds of the can which was to have married Sarah on the morrow.

Early in the morning, Sarah is astir, pleased and excited, washing her face, and making herself beautiful with a green handkerchief, and Michael with a red one. The washing wakes Mary. "I'm that used to the hammer, I wouldn't hear it at all; but washing is a rare thing, and you're after waking me up, and I having a great sleep in the sun." Mary makes talk in order to cover her anxiety regarding the bundle, in which she hid the bottles. Sarah tries to get rid of her, Michael taking no part in the affair at all; and when persuasion only succeeds in inducing Mary to go off provided she may take the bundle with her to sell the gallon can, Sarah takes up the hammer to her. Mary springs round nearly into the arms of the Priest. The morning has brought him misgivings; he wishes the day was done, for he is thinking that it's a risky thing getting mixed in any matters with such flagrant heathen as these tinkers. Mary, laughing in the ditch, hears talk of going to the chapel. Is it at marriage Sarah is fooling again? When she learns that it is the tin can above in the ditch, together with ten shillings in gold, that is to be given to the priest for the marriage, she scrambles to her feet quickly, and thinks she will be walk-

ing off the road to the fair. But the priest comes out to the chapel-gate in his surplice, and Michael brings the bundle from the ditch, and the priest takes the bit of gold and the bundle.

SARAH. It's a fine can, your reverence; for if it's poor, simple people we are, it's fine cans we can make, and himself, God help him, is a great man surely at the trade.

[*Priest opens the bundle; the three empty bottles fall out.*

SARAH. Glory to the saints of joy!

PRIEST. Did ever any man see the like of that? To think you'd be putting deceit on me, and telling lies to me, and I going to marry you for a little sum wouldn't marry a child.

SARAH (*crestfallen and astonished*). It's the divil did it, your reverence, and I wouldn't tell you a lie. (*Raising her hands.*) May the Lord Almighty strike me dead if the divil isn't after hooshing the tin can from the bag.

PRIEST (*vehemently*). Go along now, and don't be swearing your lies. Go along now, and let you not be thinking I'm big fool enough to believe the like of that when it's after selling it you are, or making a swap for drink of it, maybe, in the darkness of the night.

MARY (*in a peace-making voice, putting her hand on the Priest's left arm*). She wouldn't do the like of that, your reverence, when she hasn't a decent standing drouth on her at all; and she setting great store on her marriage the way you'd have a right to be taking her easy, and not minding the can. What differ would an empty can make with a fine, rich, hardy man the like of you?

SARAH (*imploringly*). Marry us, your reverence, for the

ten shillings in gold, and we'll make you a grand can in the evening—a can would be fit to carry water for the holy man of God. Marry us now and I'll be saying fine prayers for you, morning and night, if it'd be raining itself, and it'd be in two black pools I'd be setting my knees.

PRIEST (*loudly*). It's a wicked, thieving, lying, scheming lot you are, the pack of you. Let you walk off now and take every stinking rag you have there from the ditch.

When the persuasions and the threats of the women are without avail, and the Priest loses his temper finally, then Michael takes a part.

The priest is tied in the sacking, and is wriggling and struggling on the ground; Michael and Sarah bundle their things together in wild haste, while old Mary pats the priest through the sacking, and talks soothingly to him, and tries to keep him quiet so that the police below shall not hear. When all is ready for their departure, they administer an oath through the sacking that he shall not inform upon them at all. Then, with his hair on end, the priest comes out of the sacking. They are gathering up their things to run, when the priest stands up, and begins saying at them a Latin malediction in a loud ecclesiastical voice; he has sworn he wouldn't call the hand of man upon them, but said nothing about the fire of heaven. They run for their lives, and the priest is left master of the situation.

vi

The Tinker's Wedding is one of the Wicklow plays, in its inspiration and setting, but is better judged here in its place, when Synge finished working upon it. It has most akin with *The Well of the Saints;* the priest, out of Rabelais, or first cousin to Shakespeare's Sir Oliver Martext, goes back from the plays of modern life to a time "one or more centuries ago"; but there are differences in its style and temper. There is the rich and copious speech upon it of the *Playboy.*

Too much need not be made, in a consideration of *The Tinker's Wedding*, of the discouragement Synge had met, or of his health weakening and his turning, as it weakened, to aspects and to a treatment of life unnatural and a little morbid in their crude vigour. The hectic delight of the sick or crippled man in the ruder activities of the strong, even in their excesses, is familiar; it has even produced good literature; but never literature that is rich or genial in its humour. There is not a trace of the sick man's fever in the *Playboy;* only the delight in a life that is rich and wild a man feels who can move naturally and easily in it. In *The Tinker's Wedding*, Synge is still quite steadily with old Mary Byrne in the words she

says, "If you do be drinking a little sup in one town and another town, it's soon you get great knowledge and a great sight into the world." The characterization, so far as it goes, is perfect in its sympathy and relish; Mary, the old tipsy tramper, in a ditch poking out her pipe with a straw, with a love of a fine story, and of a fine springtime, and of a fine handsome woman, still left in her by the drink; and her philosophy, that if Sarah does strike her for drinking the can, "What's a little stroke on your head beside sitting lonesome on a fine night, hearing the dogs barking, and the bats squeaking, and you saying over, it's a short while only till you die?" Sarah Casey, a fine, thriving, healthy woman, but with the new thought come to her with the springtime of the year, and no peace while she's thinking it over; until the trouble of getting her bad name off her brings her to the realization that it will make little real difference at all. Michael Byrne, thinking it a mad thing that Sarah should be asking marriage of him, but content either way. The Priest, willing enough to take a sup of porter from the tinkers, or their piece of gold; willing even to talk out with them the hardships of his lot; but mistrusting them through all for a pack of graceless heathen, and pleased enough in the end with the trick by which he is able to put a big curse upon them—

Synge never drew a more normal lot of people. With Pegeen, "I'm not odd," they would all say; the very action, such as there is of it, is a determined assertion of the normality of each. Even Michael Byrne, in defence of his like, takes his coat off in the end.

The Tinker's Wedding is a small play, because it is, for Synge, unusually simple. The people are jolly souls; but there are no fine people, sensitive to deep sorrows and wild joys and aspirations beyond the usual; there is no tragedy in Sarah's going in the end unmarried, nor poignancy in old Mary's lonesomeness that can be eased by a glass: they are figures of comedy only. Synge's work at its greatest has a way of evading definitions, as life evades the measuring-scale. *The Tinker's Wedding* is comedy, rich and genial and humorous; but there is little in it of that deeper richness that comes when life is viewed with tenderness as well as humorous understanding. There is fire in it, but it burns with a paler flame, leaping a little hungrily. Curious to note the absence of those strokes of natural intensity, which give to the other plays a fullness and depth beyond their own; the bats may squeak in the trees maybe, but there is none of the breathing stillness of life in all its mystery and order, at the back of these few trampers in a ditch. "If

tinkers may have leave to live," then these will take their place beside Autolycus and the Flaming Tinman; but *The Tinker's Wedding* is the smallest of Synge's plays.

vii

If Synge's plays had come to us, like Shakespeare's, out of a past insufficiently illumined, there would, one thinks, be little difficulty in naming *The Tinker's Wedding* for a smaller early play taken up again, like All's Well that Ends Well, and worked over; and as little difficulty in naming *Deirdre of the Sorrows* for the latest of the plays, like The Tempest, for its beautiful serenity, and in addition marked once or twice by an imperfectness in phrase—an imperfectness that, in the eyes of a loving workman like Synge, nothing save death's interposition would excuse.

viii

Deirdre's story that was foretold—how she would be the ruin of the sons of Usna, and have a little grave by herself and a story that would be told for ever—Synge begins in Deirdre's twentieth year, when she has been some time in Conchubor's house in the hills, where the women are schooling her to meet what is to come when the High King himself takes her to his palace

at Emain, to be his queen, and to rule over the five parts of Ireland. It is evening, and Lavarcham, her nurse, and an Old Woman are speaking of her not having come in; for it is her greater pleasure to be at all times abroad on the hills. There are warnings told about Deirdre, and about Naisi and his brothers, the sons of Usna, who have been seen above chasing hares on Slieve Fuadh; but if there were no warnings told, how would trouble not come when an old king has set his heart on a young girl who has no thought but for her beauty and to be straying on the hills? "The gods help the lot of us," says the Old Woman. Conchubor is seen approaching, and Fergus, Conchubor's friend. Lavarcham tries to speak with indifference of Deirdre's absence, and seeks to move Conchubor from his intention, and is reproved for her pains. Deirdre comes in, poorly dressed, but beautiful and self-possessed and defiant. Conchubor tells her that Emain is all safe and splendid for her. She says she cannot go, becomes pleading; but Conchubor is firm: in two days she shall go to Emain.

After Conchubor and Fergus are gone, Deirdre stands looking from the window at them crossing the stepping-stones with the flood rising; and she is stiff with excitement now. She gathers rich clothes from the press, and goes

into the inner room and throws off the rags she had about her; she is putting her hair into shiny twists, when there comes a loud knocking on the door.

NAISI (*knocking loudly*). Open the door or we will burst it. (*The door is shaken.*)

OLD WOMAN (*in a timid whisper*). Let them in, and keep Deirdre in her room to-night.

AINNLE and ARDAN (*outside*). Open! Open!

LAVARCHAM (*to Old Woman*). Go in and keep her.

OLD WOMAN. I couldn't keep her. I've no hold on her. Go in yourself and I will free the door.

LAVARCHAM. I must stay and turn them out. (*She pulls her hair and cloak over her face.*) Go in and keep her.

OLD WOMAN. The gods help us.

[*She runs into the inner room.*

VOICES. Open!

LAVARCHAM (*opening the door*). Come in then and ill-luck if you'll have it so.

[*Naisi and Ainnle and Ardan come in and look round with astonishment.*

NAISI. It's a rich man has this place, and no herd at all.

LAVARCHAM (*sitting down with her head half covered*). It is not, and you'd best be going quickly.

NAISI (*hilariously, shaking rain from his clothes*). When we've had the pick of luck finding princely comfort in the darkness of the night! Some rich man of Ulster should come here and he chasing in the woods. May we drink? (*He takes up flask.*) Whose wine is this that we may drink his health?

They see the mark of the High King on the mug's golden rim.

LAVARCHAM (*jumping up with extreme annoyance*). Who says it's Conchubor's? How dare young fools the like of you—(*speaking with vehement insolence*) come prying around, running the world into troubles for some slip of a girl? What brings you this place straying from Emain? (*Very bitterly.*) Though you think, maybe, young men can do their fill of foolery and there is none to blame them.

NAISI (*very soberly*). Is the rain easing?

ARDAN. The clouds are breaking. . . . I can see Orion in the gap of the glen.

NAISI (*still cheerfully*). Open the door and we'll go forward to the little cabin between the ash-tree and the rocks. Lift the bolt and pull it.

[*Deirdre comes in on left royally dressed and very beautiful. She stands for a moment, and then as the door opens she calls softly.*

DEIRDRE. Naisi! Do not leave me, Naisi. I am Deirdre of the Sorrows.

She has seen the brothers in the woods, and called to them in the dusk. "Since that, Naisi, I have been one time the like of a ewe looking for her lamb that had been taken away from her, and one time seeing new gold on the stars, and a new face on the moon, and all times dreading Emain." She will not be queen in Emain; when Conchubor's messengers come in the morning, she will be with Naisi, taking their journey among the little islands in the sea.

Ainnle joins their hands and, by the sun and moon and the whole earth, Deirdre is wedded to Naisi.

With the second act, we are with Deirdre and Naisi in the island of Alban, whither after seven years, seven years of deep love for Deirdre and Naisi, Lavarcham has come on a visit to Deirdre, and Fergus has come from Conchubor to invite the two of them to Emain. Lavarcham tries to persuade Deirdre not to return to Emain. Deirdre will leave the choice to Naisi. Fergus tries to move Naisi by speaking of the hardness that will grow up between him and Deirdre if they linger alone in Alban until the day they grow weary. Deirdre, bringing Fergus wine, overhears Naisi's reply; he speaks thoughtfully, saying there have been days when he has had the dread upon him that he would tire of her voice: but those were dreams only, and he will not go. When Fergus leaves them, Deirdre turns and clings to Naisi, having no anger, but sorrow only: "what way would you and I, Naisi, have joy for ever?"

Naisi's brothers oppose their going to Emain, where Conchubor may still have love for Deirdre, and hatred for Naisi; but Deirdre's wish prevails with them, and we leave her stretching out her hands in farewell to the dear country of her happiness.

In a shabby tent below Emain, Conchubor is waiting for Deirdre and Naisi; while his soldiers are round about the tent. Conchubor looks carefully to see that the opening at the back of the tent is closed. Deirdre and Naisi are shown in by the soldiers.

DEIRDRE (*roaming round room*). We want what is our right in Emain (*looking at hangings*), and though he's riches in store for us it's a shabby, ragged place he's put us waiting, with frayed rugs and skins are eaten by the moths.

NAISI (*a little impatiently*). There are few would worry over skins and moths on this first night that we've come back to Emain.

DEIRDRE (*brightly*). You should be well pleased it's for that I'd worry all times, when it's I have kept your tent these seven years as tidy as a bee-hive or a linnet's nest. If Conchubor'd a queen like me in Emain he'd not have stretched these rags to meet us. (*She pulls hanging, and it opens.*) There's new earth on the ground and a trench dug. . . . It's a grave, Naisi, that is wide and deep.

NAISI (*goes over and pulls back curtain showing grave*). And that'll be our home in Emain. . . . He's dug it wisely at the butt of a hill, with fallen trees to hide it. He'll want to have us killed and buried before Fergus comes.

DEIRDRE. Take me away . . . Take me to hide in the rocks, for the night is coming quickly.

Naisi will not leave his brothers; and there are soldiers on all sides of the tent, whispering among the trees. Conchubor comes in; Naisi is for

striking him, but Deirdre comes between them; and Conchubor and Naisi are about to clasp hands, when the cry of Naisi's brothers is heard outside. "I was near won this night," says Conchubor, "but death's between us now." Naisi throws Deirdre aside, and goes out, and is struck down. To Deirdre crouching from the tumult, Conchubor comes in.

DEIRDRE (*wild with sorrow*). It is I who am desolate; I, Deirdre, that will not live till I am old.

CONCHUBOR. It's not long you'll be desolate, and I seven years saying, "It's a bright day for Deirdre in the woods of Alban"; or saying again, "What way will Deirdre be sleeping this night, and wet leaves and branches driving from the north?" Let you not break the thing I've set my life on, and you giving yourself up to your sorrow when it's joy and sorrow do burn out like straw blazing in an east wind.

DEIRDRE (*turning on him*). Was it that way with your sorrow, when I and Naisi went northward from Slieve Fuadh and let raise our sails for Alban?

CONCHUBOR. There's one sorrow has no end surely—that's being old and lonesome. (*With extraordinary pleading.*) But you and I will have a little peace in Emain, with harps playing, and old men telling stories at the fall of night. I've let build rooms for our two selves, Deirdre, with red gold upon the walls and ceilings that are set with bronze. There was never a queen in the east had a house the like of your house, that's waiting for yourself in Emain.

SOLDIER (*running in*). Emain is in flames. Fergus has

come back and is setting fire to the world. Come up, Conchubor, or your state will be destroyed!

Deirdre is left crouching over the grave. Lavarcham comes to her with offers of escape, and the consolation that now she will be a great wonder, she, the queen of sorrows; but Deirdre will not leave Naisi. Slowly she throws down clay on her three comrades. Conchubor comes to her roughly, with a torch for the marriage adding a small glow only to the great glow of burning behind the grave; when Fergus comes between. "Draw a little back," cries Deirdre; and again: "Draw a little back with the squabbling of fools when I am broken up with misery." She presses Naisi's knife into her heart, and sinks into the grave. The red glow dies, and the stage is left very dark. Conchubor is led away by the Old Woman, and he speaks with the voice of an old man; while Fergus throws his sword into the grave and speaks Deirdre's requiem.

ix

In choosing to set his tragedy of Deirdre into three acts,—beginning it at the point where Mr. George Russell's Maeterlinckian little play begins rather than at the later point chosen by Mr. Yeats, whose Deirdre can never with

much speech quite unburden herself of her retrospective narrative—Synge again showed himself the wise dramatist. His splendid simplification of the old brave story is the first to make it truly and strongly dramatic; never was his sense of the dramatic so clear and so unfailing; and while he simplified and heightened, he elaborated also, so that in none of the other plays, not in the *Playboy* even, do we find the action arising out of, and expressing, so many twists and turns of character. If *Deirdre of the Sorrows* was not worked upon as Synge would have chosen to work upon it—it was his habit, as it was Ibsen's, to go over and over his plays—there is nothing that is not finished in essential character or action. The people, of course, are Synge's people, his "fine people" whom he himself knew, with their bravery, and their joys and sorrows, "and they hitting one on the other"; he has cast them back into Deirdre's story, because it is a beautiful story, and will never lose its hold over men's hearts, and because it matters very little to Synge, or to any artist who has an eye for other than the things that are of a day only, whether his men and women are of his own time or of a time "one or more centuries ago."

For their loves and hates and aspirations Synge has secured a background here of

curious orderliness and serenity, by sending all through the play a feeling that whatever happens is foretold, a feeling of inevitability almost Greek—Deirdre does but what it is ordained for her to do, as Electra did, and when she gets her little grave we have our rest and ease because what has been foretold is accomplished. It is different in the *Playboy*, where destiny is unrecognized, save in Pegeen's fearful doubt lest all great joy is quickly passing; there all are for themselves, winning an easy or a cruel end, and resolute with the individualism which is always beneath the Irish easiness and intimacy. Some of the same tragic inevitability is in *Riders to the Sea*, where the victory of the sea was almost as an end that was foretold; some of this same high serenity was there; but what if the lone woman of the glen had known everything that was before her—how much would that not have taken from the awe of her moment of fearful indecision? Synge has not been content, even in this play, to work in a mood of mere acquiescence, however serene; he takes occasion very carefully, before the curtain has been up a moment on the anxious women in the darkening room, to put these words into the mouth of Deirdre's old nurse: "Who'd check her like was made to have her pleasure only, the way if there were no warnings told

about her you'd see troubles coming when an old king is taking her, and she without a thought but for her beauty and to be straying the hills." If the men of old had not foretold Deirdre's story, Deirdre's story would be the same. "The gods help the lot of us," says the other old woman; but it will be the same if there are no gods.

With this concession made to his own refusal to take sides, to admit that life is altered by this belief or that belief, or that art has anything to do with either, Synge is free to give his people fierceness and boldness and hope and longing; and at the same time to let these words from the past blow through his play like a clean, peaceful wind. Everyone is a little stilled from his original fierceness by this knowledge of what is to be. Conchubor tells Deirdre that he has made all sure to have her; "and yet all said there's a fear in the back of my mind I'd miss you and have great troubles in the end." Deirdre has gone into her room to put on rich dresses like Emer or Maeve—if she must be a queen, then she will make a stir to the edges of the seas; the Old Woman at the window speaks of the mountain of blackness in the sky, and Lavarcham's words—"It's more than Conchubor'll be sick and sorry, I'm thinking, before this story is told to the end"—are

scarcely spoken, when Naisi's loud knocking comes at the door. His uproariousness[1] is hushed by the sight of Conchubor's mark on the drinking vessels; the whisper of the prophecy is in the back of Naisi's mind. Do many know what is foretold? Deirdre asks of him at once; and Naisi says there are many know it, and many kings who would give a great price nevertheless to be in his place: "yet it's a poor thing it's I should bring you to a tale of blood and broken bodies, and the filth of the grave." "Do not leave me, Naisi," are the words with which she first stays him; it is Naisi only who stills the fear in her mind; and again in the end, when the seven happy years have been snatched in fate's despite, and they stand together by the foretold grave: "Do not leave me, Naisi. Do not leave me broken and alone." It is not only this note of foretold fate that is repeated; Conchubor takes us back to his earliest words when he cries, in that scene of extraordinary pleading, "Let you not break the thing I've set my life on"; Deirdre's dying words are doubly moving, for we have still in our ears her farewell to Alban, "Woods of Cuan, woods of Cuan, dear country of the east!"; and even the little-

[1] Notice—in the passage quoted on page 86—the sudden rollick in Naisi's speech as soon as he gets inside the door; it is a good example of the change in the rhythm of Synge's speech, and its dramatic effectiveness.

apple-trees by the post of Deirdre's door are made to serve their purpose of tender reminiscence. Never has Synge been so unfalteringly the great dramatist.

The first act, from its opening words—seizing powerfully the mind that has the legend for its background, arresting the attention of those who know nothing of Deirdre's story—moves through its length with a swiftness almost insupportable, and yet allowing, as the swiftness of *Riders to the Sea* allowed but scarcely, for endearing passages, such as those between Deirdre and Lavarcham; and for the genial drawing of character, as the high-spirited young men are drawn. The second act is complex, with the honest Fergus, whom Conchubor is using as an instrument, and the mad fool Owen, Conchubor's spy, playing upon Deirdre's indecision and fear and pride; but in all its complexities of character—Synge's pure additions to the legendary story—the same swiftness is upon it. It is a supreme moment in the third act, when Deirdre, taking a look at the shabby tent and speaking brightly of her own sweet housewifely care, pulls aside one of the hangings and reveals the new grave that Conchubor has been at pains to hide. Stroke follows then upon stroke, until all is accomplished. Never have Synge's touches for the ear been more masterly—the whispering of the soldiery

in the trees that Deirdre and Naisi heard about the tent; his touches for the eye—Conchubor, first seen from the window, "should be in his tempers from the way he's stepping out, and he swinging his hands." Each act has its own separate atmosphere, and each passage even; from Deirdre standing, between the going of Conchubor and the coming of Naisi, "stiff with excitement," to the moment when Deirdre tells Fergus and the High King, squabbling fools only in the face of her sorrows, to draw a little back; the intensity of each moment is imparted to us unerringly. Never has Synge's sense of contrast been more powerful, than when Conchubor in the moment of his triumph speaks of the splendours of Emain; and Emain breaks into flames.

Certainly this play in essentials is worked upon to a most beautiful completeness. Only in a phrase here and a phrase there did Synge leave work lower than his best. "Say the word"—"a sight nearer"—"getting the cold shoulder," these might have been made to receive Synge's more characteristic impress; a phrase might have received, one thinks, Synge's customary racy clearness, "What is it has you that way ever coming this place?" asks Deirdre of Conchubor. It disappoints and surprises when

Naisi falls into that modern trick for the securing of intensity, the repetition of spoken words, and says after Deirdre, "Messengers are coming?"

The new temper in the last of Synge's plays we have seen; an acquiescence: "The dawn and evening are a little while, the winter and the summer pass quickly, and what way would you and I, Naisi, have joy for ever?" An acquiescence that is not occasional only, as in old Maurya's closing words in *Riders to the Sea*, leaving Cathleen yet to find her man, and to contend for him and for her own sons against the sea; Deirdre and Conchubor, Fergus and Lavarcham, alike bow the head and pass out. In the matter of antagonism to age, there is almost a reversal: "I tell you there's little hurt getting old," says Lavarcham, "though young girls and poets do be storming at the shapes of age." This spirit of resignation leads to one of the most lovely scenes in all the plays, when Lavarcham comes to Deirdre sorrowing over the grave: "Let you rise up, Deirdre, and come off while there are none to heed us"; a scene lovely as that between Emilia and Desdemona. *Deirdre of the Sorrows* passes, no longer fiery and magnificent and tender, like a

sunset over the hills and islands of the West; but burning up to a clear white flame—"four white bodies are laid down together; four clear lights are quenched in Ireland"—a flame that is not quenched, but a torch that may be handed on.

IV

THE NOTEBOOKS

"Supposing a writer of dramatic genius were to appear in Ireland, where would he look for the subject of national drama?" This was the question literary Dublin was asking itself in the year of The Countess Cathleen's appearance: the words are those of Mr. "John Eglinton," an excellent critic.[1] "In the great countries of Europe," he went on, "although literature is apparently as prosperous as ever and is maintained with a circumstance which would seem to ensure its eternal honour, yet the springs from which the modern literary movements have been fed are probably dried up—the springs of simplicity, hope, belief, and an absolute originality like that of Wordsworth. If also, as seems likely, the approaching ages on the Continent are to be filled with great social and political questions and events which

[1] *Literary Ideals in Ireland:* controversy in "Dublin Daily Express," 1899.

can hardly have immediate expression in literature, it is quite conceivable that literature, as it did once before, would migrate to a quiet country like Ireland. . . ." At the moment this critic wrote, Synge, in his top-floor room in Paris, was arriving, perhaps, at the decision to re-migrate to Ireland.

We know where Synge looked for the subject of drama. "If a playwright chose to go through the Irish country houses he would find material, it is likely, for many gloomy plays," he wrote,[1] "that would turn on the dying away of these old families, and on the lives of the one or two delicate girls that are left so often to represent a dozen hearty men who were alive a generation or two ago." Synge did not choose to go through the Irish country houses in search of material for many gloomy plays. "When I was writing *The Shadow of the Glen*, some years ago," he said, in speaking for the first time of his method and intentions, in the preface to the *Playboy:* "I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen." Synge, it is probable, never cared at all for the "great social

[1] In *A Landlord's Garden in County Wicklow.*

and political questions"; the literature that is made upon delicate lives, he had left behind him in Paris; he came to the popular life of Ireland, and to its unsubdued imagination, with pleasure and excitement, and he found in it a drama of "hearty men," full of reality and of joy.

All art he held to be a collaboration: and he paid his debt of acknowledgment to the racy speech of these servant-girls, and his wider debt to the folk-imagination of herds and fishermen on the coasts, and to beggar-women and ballad-singers on the roads. He had admiration for the Elizabethan dramatist, working with an imaginative fever upon him, but yet staying to use words and phrases as he heard them from his own folk about him at the dinner-table. Synge lived very close to life, where it was rich and wild in reality, A friend who walked with him in the West writes of him as a man who must have read a great deal at one time, but whom you would not often see with a book in his hand. "He would sooner talk, or rather listen to talk—almost anyone's talk."[1] He passed everywhere for a very ordinary man. When Synge was discussing the Aran fishing, hookers, nobbies, mackerel and other matters in a railway train, a middle-aged

[1] Mr. Jack B. Yeats, *With Synge in Connemara.*

man who got in was in no difficulty. "Begob," he said, "I see what you are; you're a fish-dealer."

ii

Men whose vocation or interest lies among the arts will always, it is likely, be divided over the desirability of the method of the Notebook.

"My tables,—meet it is I set it down": Hamlet carries the method to something of an extreme, pausing in the open air on a cold night to note a generalization merely. Still, Hamlet is aware of the arts, and an excellent critic of one of them; that he relied upon his notebook is presumptive evidence at least that Shakespeare did so too. The least rude shock administered by Mr. Shaw's Dark Lady of the Sonnets is the visual embodiment of Shakespeare as a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles. Turner, like Shakespeare for multitudinousness, noted sunsets upon his shirt-cuff, and is remarkable amongst painters notwithstanding for his sacrifice of lesser truths to greater. Pater, with his "extraordinary patience," brought the method of the notebook to a fine art. It is only the over-conscious high-priest of Imagination, like Blake, who would away with "the rotten rags of memory." Dickens, perhaps, brought the note-

book into disrepute: there is a tedious air of professionalism in its over-use, when the imagination is flagging. The notebook is an excellent servant, but a soul-destroying master; its use is that of a granary, stored against need, for the sustenance of the imagination: open shop in it, and you conduct retail trade in the appurtenances of your art merely; it is as though you were to sell silica and lime for glass, without annealing. All methods are good, "if imagination amend them"; the only danger of the method of note-taking is that it may pass for the labour of creation. It is likely that the only sort of misuse of the notebook is that of Mr. Bayes in The Rehearsal, who overheard a conversation between two merchants in the City, and flap! he popped it down, into the text of his tragedy.

"Synge wrote down words and phrases wherever he went," says Mr. W. B. Yeats. It has been charged against him therefore that speech such as Christy's is nothing but a patchwork. No Irish peasant ever spoke like that, say the detractors. Since the detractors have no sure sense of drama, no eye or ear for character, and no love for beauty, but come to the *Playboy* for stale tags of politics or religion only, there is little else they could say. It is a new charge against the user of the notebook that his lan-

guage is too perfectly finished to be true to observation. Detraction might, however, go on to say that Synge made a literary crib, lifting bits from Pierre Loti, from Baudelaire, and from the Holy Bible, and stringing them to a chain of speech something like that of the Irish peasantry. Detraction is quite capable.

Fortunately we have Synge's notebooks. *The Aran Islands*, published in 1907, but written and circulated in typescript some three or four years earlier, and *In Wicklow* and *In West Kerry*, first published in a Dublin periodical in 1906–1907, may be regarded as Synge's armoury of stored impressions, awaiting selection, and final tempering in the dramatist's imagination. The books are much else: *The Aran Islands* must go up amongst the few great journals giving a simple and direct account of a life amongst a people; but it will be to our purpose to regard them primarily as notebooks here. "In the pages that follow," says Synge, in his introduction to the last-named book, "I have given a direct account of my life on the islands, and of what I met with among them, inventing nothing, and changing nothing that is essential." This is not the method of the dramatist. Synge, however, we know, took from life his ideas, his words, his phrases, and his characters; and we

may find in these books of day-to-day impressions the sources of all save one or two of his plays.

iii

Michael James drunk, it will be remembered, was a great philosopher upon marriage. "What's a single man, I ask you, eating a bit in one house and drinking a sup in another, and he with no place of his own, like an old braying jackass strayed upon the rocks?"[1] Let us see what Old Mourteen, who gave Synge his company and his Irish on Aran, had to say about it: "Bedad, noble person, I'm thinking it's soon you'll be getting married. Listen to what I'm telling you: a man who is not married is no better than an old jackass. He goes into his sister's house, and into his brother's house; he eats a bit in this place and a bit in another place, but he has no home for himself; like an old jackass straying on the rocks." These are the words Synge wrote in the evening in his journal, sitting at his little table looking out over the dark sound, while the dancers were waiting ready for him and his fiddle in the kitchen. The others are the words as he recast and compressed them, and heightened their humour, working with the dramatist's

[1] Passage quoted on p. 68.

loyalty to the instinct of his art, which bade him (as Lionel Johnson notes of Pater in his different work) "leave unused so much, and choose so little, of all that wealth." Old Mourteen is the notebook, Michael James is the character fully wrought by the dramatist; if Old Mourteen be real, then Michael James is real, and doubly real, with the reality that comes only through the imagination.

We may look a little further into the genesis of Michael James. Synge, staying on the great Blasket Island, slept in the adjacent bed to his Host, who lit his pipe and talked a long while.

> Then he put up his pipe on the end of the bed-post. "You'll be tired now," he went on, "so it's time we were sleeping; and, I humbly beg your pardon, might I ask your name?" I told him.
>
> "Well, good night so," he said, "and may you have a good sleep your first night in this island."

The very accents of Michael James are in these reported speeches; compare:

> MICHAEL *(going to the door with men)*. And begging your pardon, mister, what name will we call you, for we'd like to know?
>
> CHRISTY. Christopher Mahon.
>
> MICHAEL. Well, God bless you, Christy, and a good rest till we meet again when the sun'll be rising to the noon of day.

See how, while the talk is the same talk, its

rhythm is perfected, and how in itself it has become an expression of character. A few pages further on in the *West Kerry* papers, and we read: "'Do you see that sandy head?' he said, pointing out to the east, 'that is called the Stooks of the Dead Women; for one time a boat came ashore there with twelve dead women on board her, big ladies with green dresses and gold rings, and fine jewelries, and a dead harper or fiddler along with them.'" So it was in Kerry Synge got the Stooks of the Dead Women; through which Michael James would have to return "with a drop taken," if his queer daughter had her way. It was a nice name, and down it went in his notebook, or—which is the same thing—on the tablets of his memory; in precisely the same way that Synge looked back and saw his Elizabethan predecessor making his own the words and phrases dropped at the dinner table; for "all art is a collaboration."

Synge pushed his belief still further. The oldest man on Inismaan told him the story of a Connaught man who killed his father with the blow of a spade, and fled to the island, and threw himself on the mercy of the natives, who kept him safe for weeks and then shipped him to America. "This impulse to protect the criminal," says Synge, "is universal in the West. It seems partly due to the association between

justice and the hated English jurisdiction, but more directly to the primitive feeling of these people, who are never criminals yet always capable of crime, that a man will not do wrong unless he is under the influence of a passion which is as irresponsible as a storm on the sea. . . . Such a man, they say, will be quiet all the rest of his life, and if you suggest that punishment is needed as an example, they ask, 'Would any one kill his father if he was able to help it?'" We may compare Michael James, in the passage already quoted (p. 64), "You should have had good reason for doing the like of that."

Synge, being incapable of thinking a political thought, gave not a moment's heed to English jurisdiction, but all his heed to the primitive feelings of these people, "never criminals yet always capable of crime." What, said his ironic mind, if after all this man had *not* killed his father? The dramatist went on to make the *Playboy*.

iv

The Aran Islands is to Synge what the Gesta Romanorum or Il Pecorone is to Shakespeare: the mine from which we may dig the unpolished ore of the plays. One play above all others is implicit in this book; and all the

spirit of these tragic islands is in *Riders to the Sea.*

Now a man has been washed ashore in Donegal with one pampooty on him, and a striped shirt with a purse in one of the pockets, and a box for tobacco.

For three days the people here have been trying to fix his identity. Some think it is the man from this island, others think that the man from the south answers the description more exactly. To-night as we were returning from the slip we met the mother of the man who was drowned from this island, still weeping and looking out over the sea. She stopped the people who had come over from the south island to ask them with a terrified whisper what is thought over there.

Later in the evening, when I was sitting in one of the cottages, the sister of the dead man came in through the rain with her infant, and there was a long talk about the rumours that had come in. She pieced together all she could remember about his clothes, and what his purse was like, and where he had got it, and the same for his tobacco-box, and his stockings. In the end there seemed little doubt that it was her brother.

"Ah!" she said, "it's Mike sure enough, and please God they'll give him a decent burial."

Then she began to keen slowly to herself. She had loose yellow hair plastered round her head with the rain, and as she sat by the door suckling her infant, she seemed like a type of the women's life upon the islands.

We think of Nora counting the stitches and crying out, with a tone how much more poignant, "It's Michael, Cathleen, it's Michael; God spare his soul, and what will herself say when

she hears this story, and Bartley on the sea?" Synge's narrative is hushed and quiet, with just the strain of excitement beneath it, as one would feel such a scene, and write of it immediately after; but the young girl's cry in the play comes tense in every word, and terrible with the exaltation of tragedy. The drowned man in Donegal, the shirt and piece of a plain stocking —coming to these things now in Synge's simple, direct narrative, we find them filled with the same terrible intensity.

A young man, another time, was drowned on his way to the south island. "'When the horses were coming down to the ship an old woman saw her son, that was drowned a while ago, riding on one of them. She didn't say what she was after seeing, and this man caught the horse, he caught his own horse first, and then he caught this one, and after that he went out and was drowned.'" Out of this bit of a young boy's narrative, and with perhaps a hint from a story the old man told of a woman who was away with the fairies, and came riding, "herself on a grey horse, riding behind a young man," Synge made Maurya's speech of the fearful thing she had seen: "I looked up then, and I crying, at the grey pony, and there was Michael upon it— with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet."

v

Materials for the Wicklow plays also are in this book about the West. An old man told Synge a story of an unfaithful wife—the story of the *Shadow of the Glen.*

Old Pat's story or Synge's, it is a "fine story." Something of it may be read in the story of The Roman Earl in the "Love Songs of Connaught," in Dr. Hyde's prose translation, with its conclusion, "In women though great is your confidence, it is long that they are going with the wind." Synge saw a play in it, and an admirably told story has become supreme drama. All the old man's calculated brutality has gone, but the wildness remains, and the reality. "A cup, with a saucer under it," "she told him he was tired," "the dead man hit him a blow with the stick"—these are narrative effects characteristic of the story teller;[1] Synge has translated every one of them into the medium of the dramatist; there is the same intense particularity, the same clearness of character, the same visual humour, in the play, made unerringly dramatic. The opening words of story and play are almost identical; compare the dialogue, however, at this point:

NORA. Maybe, if you're not easy afeard, you'd stay here a short while alone with himself.

TRAMP. I would surely. A man that's dead can do no hurt.

[1] See *The Aran Islands.*

Constraint, a woman's soul in the stress of uncertainty, has come into Nora's words. There is the finality of perfect workmanship in "A man that's dead can do no hurt,"—the words that are repeated with a terrible irony of effect when Dan Burke rises in his bed—very different from the merely pleasant "I'm not dead at all in the world."[1] Easy to see what has happened to the tale: it has been through the furnace of the dramatist's imagination, and wild humour has become tragic irony. The woman is no longer "a woman," impersonal butt for an old humorous man's generalizations upon women, who will be going with the wind; she is Nora Burke, with a personal tragedy that will stay in the mind as long as Nora Helmer's.

Another component has gone to the finished product: we may find it in the raw state in *In Wicklow*, where Synge is told of the poor fellow who was taken by some excitement and threw off his clothes and ran away into the hills; and nothing was known of him until they found his body eaten by the crows. Patch Darcy is important to the tragedy of Nora. Synge brooded over the old man's story told in Aran, and finally gave it its setting in Wicklow. For here, "the peculiar climate, acting on a population that is already lonely and dwindling,

[1] See *The Aran Islands*.

has caused or increased a tendency to nervous depression among the people, and every degree of sadness, from that of the man who is merely mournful to that of the man who has spent half his life in the mad-house, is common among these hills."

Another of the Wicklow plays, the *Tinker's Wedding*, is to be seen in outline in the journals. This outline has been filled in with rich amusement to make the comedy. The "poor price" to be given for the good Priest's offices has become a "little small sum wouldn't marry a child." The tin can, in the comedy, is drunk at the fall of night, with no good time elapsing, by old Mary Byrne, who thus pushes the ass into a subsidiary part only—both changes dictated by the dramatist's sure instinct.

For the *Well of the Saints*, there is a hint only; in the old Wicklow tramper who had been a month in Kilmainham, and "cared nothing for the plank-bed and uncomfortable diet; but he always gathered himself together, and cursed with extraordinary rage, as he told how they had cut off the white hair which had grown down upon his shoulders." His pride and dignity, like Mary Doul's and Martin Doul's, were in his distinction from the other people: "and I have often heard him saying to himself, as he sat beside me under a ditch:

'What use is an old man without his hair? A man has only his bloom like the trees; and what use is an old man without his white hair?'" In *The Aran Islands*, too, there is a hint for this play, from a couple who quarrel all day long, while the people gather to hear them as eagerly as if they were going to a racecourse.

Synge's drama is like all good art, complete and self-sufficient; but much of the fascination of these notebooks is in the glimpse they give of the dramatist at work, and in the hint of the mood that moved him to creation.

vi

In every page of these notebooks, in which Synge gave a direct account of the life he met as he walked the roads and sojourned in the islands, inventing nothing, as he said, and changing nothing that is essential, there is a separate pleasure; and sometimes one may come upon a passage where all the character of the man—and the character of all his work, at once so passionate and tender—is made more clear than chapters of analysis and comment could hope to make it. Such a passage as this, in description of a Wicklow glen:

This morning the air is clear, and there is a trace of summer again. I am sitting in a nook beside the stream from the Upper Lake, close down among the heather and

bracken and rushes. I have seen the people going up to Mass in the Reformatory and the valley seems empty of life.

I have gone on, mile after mile, of the road to Sally Gap, between brown dikes and chasms in the turf, with broken foot-bridges across them, or between sheets of sickly moss and bog-cotton that is unable to thrive. The road is caked with moss that breaks like pie-crust under my feet, and in corners where there is shelter there are sheep loitering, or a few straggling grouse. . . . The fog has come down in places; I am meeting multitudes of hares that run round me at a little distance—looking enormous in the mists—or sit up on their ends against the sky line to watch me going by. When I sit down for a moment the sense of loneliness has no equal. I can hear nothing but the slow running of water and the grouse crowing and chuckling underneath the band of cloud. Then the fog lifts and shows the white empty roads winding everywhere, with the added sense of desolation one gets passing an empty house on the side of a road.

When I turn back again the air has got stuffy and heavy and calm, with a cloud still down upon the glen; there is a dead heat in the air that is not natural so high up, and the silence is so great three or four wrens that are singing near the lake seem to fill the valley with sound. In most places I can see the straight ending of the cloud, but above the lake grey fingers are coming up and down, like a hand that is clasping and opening again. One longs for rain or wind or thunder. The very ewes and lambs have stopped bleating, and are slinking round among the stacks of turf.

This is a beautiful piece of pure description. It is more—it is the expression and evocation

of a mood that is the mood of all the plays, in which life is seen and heard and noted with an intense particularity, and the mind is filled with a longing that has no words, and a nameless pleasure so keen that it is almost pain.

vii

It will not be doing the poet in Synge an injustice, to regard the poems and translations, also, as the notebooks of a dramatist. Synge was always the poet, not more so in his verse than in his prose. There is at all times something lyrical in the speech of his people; nothing in the slim volume of his *Poems* holds so much of the heart of reality and beauty as does the talk of Pegeen and her playboy. Using poetic in its special sense, however, Synge's poetic diction has its own peculiar character, not less than his dramatic. For Synge, there is no strong poetry that has not its roots in reality: "it may almost be said that before verse can be human again it must learn to be brutal." He put the thought into a critical poem, *The Passing of the Shee: After looking at one of A. E.'s pictures*": bidding adieu to sweet Angus, Maeve, and Fand—the "blessed Shee upon the mountains," whom Mr. Russell's Deirdre was wont to see in her dreams—and announcing his intention rather of drinking in

Tubber Fair, and of stretching in Red Dan Sally's ditch.

He wrote a poem which is both brutal and human, and very near indeed to great poetry, telling how the Erris men trapped Danny, making the forcible little incident live amazingly, and concluding with a verse Wordsworth might have written, save its last line:

> And when you're walking out the way
> From Bangor to Belmullet,
> You'll see a flat cross on a stone
> Where men choked Danny's gullet.

These are poems of self-revelation, one or two with Wordsworth's tone in them again:

> I knew the stars, the flowers, and the birds,
> The grey and wintry sides of many glens,
> And did but half remember human words,
> In converse with the mountains, moors, and fens.

There is the tale of the 'Mergency Man who set out on a night of great rain to cross the river and serve processes on the people; we may read it in Synge's Kerry journal, as it came from the lips of his informant: "Then he gave two leps or three, and the peelers heard him give a great shriek down in the flood. They went home after—what could they do?—and the 'mergency man was found in the sea stuck in a net." In the poem:

> Then the peelers said, "Now mind your lepping,
> How can you see the stones for stepping?"

"We'll wash our hands of your bloody job."
"Wash and welcome," says he, "begob."
He made two leps with a run and dash,
Then the peelers heard a yell and splash;
And the 'mergency man in two days and a bit
Was found in the ebb tide stuck in a net.

The 'mergency man is in the journals and the poems, but not in the plays; he may well have been on his way there.

The poems are the man speaking, says Mr. Masefield. We may find much in them of autobiographic interest—two poems, *An Epitaph* and *On an Anniversary*, showing how early the expectation of death came to him. Equally we may find in them the dramatist, with his love for sharp contrasts, for everything that is wild and full of its own life, and his power of giving to the chosen material an intensely concentrated illumination. Synge, by the side of his dramatic work, struck into lyric, as Shakespeare did; unlike Shakespeare, he was not able to find a place for the verses in the plays.

He exercised his pen also on putting into the prose idiom of the plays some sonnets of Petrarch and pieces from Villon. Some of these have the anguish and beauty of the best of the dramatic speeches. Petrarch is jealous of the heavens and earth that have taken Laura:

What a grudge I am bearing the earth that has its arms about her, and is holding that face away from me, where I was finding peace from great sadness.

What a grudge I am bearing the Heavens that are after taking her, and shutting her in with greediness, the Heavens that do push their bolt against so many.

What a grudge I am bearing the blessed saints that have got her sweet company, that I am always seeking; and what a grudge I am bearing against Death, that is standing in her two eyes, and will not call me with a word.

So might the Playboy speak, with an added deference to time and place, had the loss of love been his instead of Pegeen's.

All the sorrow of beauty's inevitable destiny is in the words Petrarch speaks, of Laura's graces and virtues that are no more: "The hair that was of shining gold, and brightness of the smile that was the like of an angel's surely, and was making a paradise of the earth, are turned to a little dust that knows nothing at all." So Deirdre speaks. And the Old Woman of Villon puts her own lament for the passing of strength and beauty into these words:

The man I had a love for—a great rascal would kick me in the gutter—is dead thirty years and over it, and it is I am left behind, grey and aged. When I do be minding the good days I had, minding what I was one time, and what it is I'm come to, and when I do look on my own self, poor and dry, and pinched together, it wouldn't be much would set me raging in the streets.

"The man I had a love for—a great rascal would kick me in the gutter"—how much of Synge there is in the words.

NOTE ON SYNGE'S ALLEGED INDEBTEDNESS TO FRENCH SOURCES

Did Synge owe more than our criticism has acknowledged to influences outside, and earlier than, his personal intimacy with Irish life? It is stubbornly asserted, generally by those who wish for some reason irrelevant to art to detract from his achievement, that his plays carry the burden of an undischarged debt to French literature. He read Racine diligently, we know, and found a use for something of his flawless concentration; but one may read Racine for a lifetime, and be unable at the end to write even *Riders to the Sea.* He doubtless, in his top-floor room, read all the classics, Villon and Rabelais and Molière with an approval of which he makes repeated acknowledgment. With Molière he might be shown to have much kinship, not only in his preoccupation with character, but in the remote quality of melancholy ever present beneath passages of the most joyous gaiety. Mr. Yeats asserts that, in his experience, Synge never read anything but the classics. He wrote papers, however, during a short period, on contemporary French literature, and it is likely therefore that he read some of it. It is extremely unlikely that he imagined himself a Baudelaire, or admired Flaubert, if he

read him, for anything but the perfection of his workmanship. If he allowed himself to be swayed greatly by Maeterlinck or Huysmans, then he succeeded, as Wilde did not, in keeping the fact a secret from his work. In all his writings, Synge's only reference to a school to which he is said by some to have delivered himself bound hand and foot a pupil, is a peremptory arraignment of Baudelaire for "morbidity," because he had no humour.

However, there is no reason to doubt that during his residence in Paris Synge was aware, in one degree or another, of the new books and plays. In 1901 there was performed and printed a one-act play by M. Georges Clemenceau, called Le Voile du Bonheur, which may well have started Synge thinking about *The Well of the Saints.*

The setting of M. Clemenceau's little play, for some reason not unconnected with the advantages of picturesque scenic and musical accompaniment, is in China. A mandarin, Tchang-I, whose wife Si-Tchun is a pearl of chastity, whose little son is all that is hopeful, and who is pleased to do good work in the reformation of criminals, is blind. A great doctor, in mistaken beneficence, causes to fall from Tchang-I the veil which hides from him the world. What a vision of happiness is to be

his! At once he sees that his wife Si-Tchun, who holds his hand, holds with her other that of her lover, his own best friend Tou-fou; behind his back, his little son is making game of him; while a reformed convict, who spoke so sweetly, is running off with his valuables. "Alas!" cries Tchang-I, "my blindness was my vision of happiness." His blindness, his blindness, he must have his blindness, so that he may once again have joy in the only reality that, for him, is happiness! Willingly he reassumes the veil which cloaks from his eyes the disillusionizing world. "It is wonders enough he has seen in a short space for the life of one man only." Once the veil is reassumed, he is able again to say:

> Le ciel est bon. La terre est douce. La Chine est un prodige des Dieux. Le printemps vient, paré de verdure et couronné de fleurs, pour le grand rite de l'amour. . . . Je ne suis qu'un homme, dans mon habit orné de dragons d'or, mais je me sens égal aux Dieux.

In a word, he is himself, like Martin Doul, "a wonder." The blind mandarin's conclusion is certainly very like the blind beggar's—"Well, sight's a queer thing for upsetting a man." For the lover of the literary parallel, we may even point to the words of M. Clemenceau's Tchang-I when the sight is coming upon him—"Je vois! Je vois! . . . Le ciel! le soleil! quel éblouissement!" and leave it to him to recall that

Synge's blind Martin saw the walls of the church, and the green bits of fern in them, and the great width of the sky.

It is perfectly probable, then, that Synge read, or knew of, M. Clemenceau's graceful little Chinese play. It is possible that the germ of the *Well of the Saints* came with him from Paris, and did not enter his mind only as he listened on Aran to the quarrelsome pair who became Martin and Mary Doul. If the fact of his indebtedness could be established, it would detract without doubt from Synge's absolute originality in the idea of his play. It would detract nothing whatever from the magic of his treatment of the idea. As Hazlitt remarked, when it was said that Gay took from Tibullus one of the prettiest of his songs in The Beggar's Opera, there is nothing about Covent Garden in Tibullus. Mary Doul and Martin Doul, the happy and blind, will remain in the memory, one fancies, when Tchang-I and Si-Tchun are forgotten—as M. Clemenceau has quite possibly already forgotten them. It is possible that M. Clemenceau, in his turn, had read and remembered Sir Harry Wildair in Farquhar's comedy, who, though he saw his angelic wife in the arms of another, would have "thought the devil had raised the phantom," and refused his belief to the vision. The truth is the people

who have never written a play, but who dislike the play someone else has written, are disposed to put an altogether unnatural emphasis on the need for originality of plot in drama. Shakespeare, they should remember, may possibly once have invented a plot, and Sheridan certainly never. Our judgment may perhaps be suffered to stand, that Synge, above most dramatists, went straight to life for his material. If our interest is in understanding the *Playboy*, we shall learn more by looking into Synge's notebook of his life on the Aran Islands than by remembering that Baudelaire once opened a conversation with the remark that he had come from killing his father.[1]

[1] Those who wish to read more regarding the alleged French "morbidity" of J. M. Synge must be referred to the Dublin Press *passim*. So far as the controversy has attained the levels of ordinary sanity, it has resolved itself into a difference of opinion between Mr. W. B. Yeats and Mr. D. J. O'Donohue. Mr. Yeats does not remember that Synge ever shewed himself aware of contempory French literature. Mr. O'Donohue remembers occasions on which he did. Also, we have it on the word of Mr. Masefield that Synge thought Pierre Loti "the best living writer of prose." A meeting of the Irish National Literary Society on January 22, 1912, was devoted to the subject.

V

DESIGN AND COMPOSITION

"Intensification," a simple recourse to the dictionary will give assurance, is the act of intensifying; and to intensify, if we may believe our counsellor, is to make more intense. But in accepting still further guidance there is danger, for the connotation of "strain," when one of the arts is under consideration, is likely to be something violent, some suggestion of force unwisely or uneconomically applied; and this can have no application to Synge, in whom there is nothing of violence or consciousness of effort.

The word may stand, however, if we rid it of any such suggestion of powers overtasked, and think only of the passionate embrace the artist may give to life, or of the extreme effort by which he may raise his chosen material to the highest degree. We are often conscious of feelings akin to anguish in face of the most exquisite beauty; the sensitive heart is wrung

by loveliness as well as by sorrow; both may have an equal poignancy. The mood in which the wonder and beauty of life are almost more than we can bear, is a rare mood with most of us; it is the mood we have found in all the work of Synge. Life, in some one of its isolated aspects, wrings him with emotion: a procession of men and women along the olive bogs, between mountains and sea; the sister of the drowned man in Aran—who, as she sat by the door suckling her infant, with loose yellow hair plastered round her head by the rain, "seemed like a type of the women's life upon the islands." Life for Synge was for ever resolving itself into some appearance that typified all its own sorrow or beauty; the journals we have done no more than glance at are full of little pictures that are unforgettable. He notes the "strained feeling of regret one has so often in these places when there is rain in the air." He notes again, "in moments when one is most aware of this ceaseless fading of beauty, some incident of tramp life gives a local human intensity to the shadow of one's mood." In the Wicklow hills, he notes how the winds coming down through the narrow glens with the congested whirl and roar of a torrent, break at times "for sudden moments of silence that keep up the tension of the mind." *Strain, intensity,*

tension—these are the words most often on his lips. It is likely that Synge lived at an almost intolerable pitch of sensibility to life, for these are the qualities we have found ourselves noting most often as we have passed his dramatic work under review. What are the touches for eye and ear—the sounds at the cross-roads, the fine white boards, the cows breathing and sighing in the stillness of the air—but Synge's deliberate means of giving a "local human intensity" to the shadow of our mood? What are the checks we have noted in the long and meditative rhythm, but the dramatist's deliberately contrived "sudden moments of silence that keep up the tension of the mind"? Synge's plays are fully charged and quivering with his temperament. It has been our concern to note, in passing, their individual form and personality and finish; in this chapter we may look a little more closely and a little more generally into qualities and values.

ii

The mind holds some one abiding image of the work of any artist whose creations have strong character; an image especially firm and clear, perhaps, of the work of a dramatist, heightened as it is and ready to the imagination. Of Shakespeare, it would be something courtly,

a great and noble place filled with magnificence and movement, and beyond, glimpses of an English countryside, unaffected and serene and never far away, but subservient. Mr. Shaw's drama all takes place in the drawing-room, conscious to the last finical detail of its middle-class status, but turned for this occasion only into a debating chamber. With Synge's work spread before us, it is easy, one thinks, to see the whole in image. A simple small room holds it, with strong men and old women and a young girl talking out their joys and sorrows and going about their work; and beyond the door there is the breathing stillness of all the life above which they are lifted.

The room is never a vacuum, like Ibsen's; nor an aquarium, in which figures float intense but dim, like Maeterlinck's, or beautiful and recondite, like Mr. Yeats'; it is never a room into which we look from without. We are in the room; we have come in from a wide life, and we shall go out, and down, again in a moment to it; over the half of the door come the little sounds of general humanity, sharpened to an intensity of clearness; over it are stretched, may be, the colours of the sunset. The mists may roll up over the hills, obscuring the cows we may hear chewing heavily or coughing in the shadows of the hedge; or it

may be the sea beyond, with the cry of the curlews: we shall be always in this small room, listening to the talk in a language "curiously simple yet dignified." Every word uttered is important; it goes out to the life beyond, as it were, and comes back intensified. The speakers are wild or fiery or plaintive or tender, as they move among the "daily trifles that veil from them the terrors of the world." To us, in this small room, the outlines of life have taken on an extraordinary and intense radiancy and clearness.

Synge, waiting for the steamer in a public-house on the north island of Aran, found himself in such a room:

> The kitchen was filled with men sitting closely on long forms ranged in lines at each side of the fire. A wild-looking but beautiful girl was kneeling on the hearth talking loudly to the men, and a few natives of Inishmaan were hanging about the door, miserably drunk. At the end of the kitchen the bar was arranged, with a sort of alcove beside it, where some older men were playing cards. Overhead there were the open rafters, filled with turf and tobacco smoke.
>
> This is the haunt so much dreaded by the women of the other islands, where the men linger with their money till they go out at last with reeling steps and are lost in the sound. Without this background of empty curaghs, and bodies floating naked with the tide, there would be something almost absurd about the dissipation of this simple place where men sit, evening after evening,

drinking bad whisky and porter, and talking with endless repetition of fishing, and kelp, and of the sorrows of purgatory.

Given this background of the terrors of the world veiled by its daily trifles, the life of an island shebeen is material enough ; it joins hands with universal life, " and makes one little room, an everywhere."

iii

Synge's task was to render this chosen aspect of life, " with no diminution of the sense of reality, but with more and more purged and perfected delightfulness of interest "—as it is the task of all realists, and as Pater has defined it to be the achievement of the Dutch genre painters. Decadent arts, such as those on which Synge had turned his back, fail first of all in their ability to characterize ; things and persons lose their native quality and vigour under a pale cast of words. Idealization is the word for the process.

" After the same fashion," John Addington Symonds notes of the Italian Decadents in painting, " furniture, utensils, houses, animals, birds, weapons, are idealized—stripped, that is to say, of what in these things is specific and vital." Synge did not submit his subject-matter to this process, and a number of his country-

men, to whom Boucicault means national drama and Thomas Davis national poetry, blamed him that he did not. The very furniture and utensils of Synge's plays retain what in them is specific and vital: a tin can is a "fine can," the furniture of Pegeen's bar is detailed with loving care by Christy, and as for the Widow Quin's house, it is her "little houseen a perch off on the rising hill," and we may see from it, as though from the corner by her wheel where the wisest old men gather, "the schooners, hookers, trawlers is sailing the sea." For Synge works from real life upwards; and when a play is raised and set firmly on the tragic heights, like the *Playboy* or *Riders to the Sea*, it carries with it its own circumstantial detail: Pegeen still has the stink of poteen on her, and room is made in the severe little island tragedy for the pig with the black feet.

Pater, again, found Charles Lamb "unoccupied in the great matters," but "in immediate contact with what is real, especially in its caressing littleness, that littleness in which there is much of the whole woeful heart of things." Synge, occupied in the great matters if ever artist was, remains also in immediate contact with what is real; knowing that to bring us to the heart of sorrow there is nothing so powerful as the caressing small touch; as

Shakespeare knew also, when he chose to break the burden of Desdemona's foreboding sorrow with her instructions to Emilia for the unpinning of her gown. The best moment in modern drama, outside Synge's, is the breaking of kind old Mr. Pargetter's beer-mug, precipitating us into Nan's pitiful tragedy of beauty misprised: "Not my Toby broken? . . . 'Ooever 'ave a broke my Toby?"—Mr. Masefield also is master of that littleness in which there is so much of the woeful heart of things.

For there is a species of dramatic intensity that comes from sources that are external to character or strong incident; and there is no master in the theatre who has not his hold over them also. "Hark! who is it that knocks?" says Desdemona, pausing in her singing. "It is the wind," replies Emilia. A little thing, this making vocal the world outside with a whisper from the wind; but how supreme a touch at this moment, in its intensifying of the pitiful isolation of Desdemona's bedchamber in the Cyprus castle! In the same way, the door that the younger girl has closed at her first entry in *Riders to the Sea*, is blown open behind her. In this play, we have seen how the talk of the wind rising, and how the sea will be worse when the tide is turned to it, enables us to hear the wind and the sea—to be aware

of their actual value. Then comes this touch for the eye, of the door blowing open. Thus early in the play this door becomes a mark for our attention; no ordinary door, a door of tragic import—through which the cry on the seashore will be heard, the old bowed women will come dreadfully silent, the body will be carried. In all the plays we may see these touches of the deliberate master with an eye aware of the actual emotional values of the stage.

In the *Well of the Saints*, after Martin Doul's scene of extraordinary pleading with the young girl, Timmy the smith picks up Martin's coat and stick from where he left them lying, and *some things fall out of the coat pocket*, we read: for no other reason at all but that Timmy may give to the scene a more and more perfected delightfulness of interest by the strong and resolute emphasis with which he stoops and picks, one by one, the things up again. The sharp light of a match beneath the haggard face of the Tramp in the *Shadow of the Glen*, serves the same calculated purpose as the blown-open door in *Riders to the Sea*, with an equal justness and precision: for, What sort of man is this? is the question we have to ask ourselves, and continue to ask as the play goes on. What is the reason that the Christian coat of poor Shawn should

be left in the hands of Michael James in the *Playboy*, but that the manner of doing so is theatrically effective—not in moving us to laughter by its sheer physical rough-and-tumble merely, but in pointing, as nothing else could point, the first entry of the Playboy; when Michael steps back against the bar, the gallant garment hanging limply in his hand. The importuned tinker in the *Tinker's Wedding*, at work on the can, starts violently, with the shock of a little scald—it is the first jog to laughter, and when we have laughed the humour becomes at once more genial. Conchubor, the High King, coming to the cottage where Deirdre is being reared against the day of her marriage to himself, and finding her out on the hillside, *examines her workbox:* a cue for the actor to show us the tragic absurdity of the old man who insists upon wooing when the half of his feelings are the feelings of a father.

It would plainly be wrong, however, to regard such a stroke as this last one as though it were external to character; we shall be finer in our criticism, if we say that all these are intensifying touches that take their rise in character, but find their expression, not in dialogue, but in action; perhaps some little action at first sight scarcely relevant. A speech from Con-

chubor, filled with his character, could not give his sharp portrait to us as that momentary handling of the girl's workbox gave it. These are the subtleties of Synge's visual art. They are to be distinguished from the broad employment of visual effects in which all strong dramatists take joy; Synge's sense of the theatre is all awake to these: the Priest wriggling and struggling in the sack, is as comic to the eye as Stephano's monster of the isle with four legs, wriggling beneath the gaberdine, "who hath got, as I take it, an ague." Contrast our instance from the *Well of the Saints*, with the incident that follows immediately after; when Timmy the smith, taking Molly from the pitiful old man who is dimming again, goes into the forge, and pulls the door after the two of them: thus securing with perfect justice an emotional effect that is familiar—the people inside in the warm glow, and the one person shut outside. It is no more and no less than the effect of the House They Built for Wendy, one of those primitive emotional appeals to which the theatre lends itself in the hands of all dramatists, and in which Mr. J. M. Barrie has an especially pretty mastery. Synge's more characteristic touches for eye and ear are something different from this.

His touches for the eye, we have seen illustrated; touches for the mind's eye also, as when Conchubor is painted for us in his tempers. His touches for the ear, with their extraordinary value in the creation of the atmosphere proper to the play's mood, are touches for the mind's ear always. For Synge's art has no great need of shaking sheets of iron, if thunder be the mood; nor, if it be a wild night and rain falling, of tossing parched peas in a cylinder; nor of a cogged machine turning against a piece of cloth tightly stretched, if a great relentless wind must be suggested. In all the plays not a fire-arm is exploded.

iv

Synge rooted his art in reality, and gave it expression first of all through character. In drama, if character be rich and copious, action will follow; bring your people to birth first, set them in movement after: it is the natural order, despite Aristotle and—in the comprehensive phrase of Shakespeare's Lafeu—"all the learned and authentic fellows." Shakespeare's plots do not matter as Arthur Brooke or Thomas Lyly cultivates them; it is the characters with which Shakespeare peoples his appropriated territory, that bring all to life.

Synge went to reality for his stories, and not to romance; and yet, go through the stories of all his plays and, while always eager with action, what do they amount to in incident? Two blind beggars bother a community of the seeing for a while, and then go on their ways. A young woman who is lonesome and makes talk therefore with the men, is turned from her husband's door to go walking the roads with a tramp. A dispirited lad hits his father, and is turned a likely gaffer in the end of all. A tinker woman thinks she will marry, and then goes her way, thinking she will not. Two plays only are tales of death and broken bodies; one of these Synge took from the common stock of Irish dramatists, and it would be the less Synge's on that account, had he not worked his own love of character into it, and given in Deirdre's simple pride a new spring to the tragic action.

Every true dramatist who takes up a story ready-made will put his own shape upon it. Mr. Yeats — who, his friend Lionel Johnson surmised, "wrote for the stage rather from a desire to have his verses spoken than from a strong bent for the drama"—in his play of Fergus and the Druid, makes Fergus lay down his sceptre not under compulsion of the men of Ulster, as the old story had it, but to

escape the duties of kingship, and to find time to dream awhile: as Mr. Yeats' people like to find time to dream awhile. With how much more powerful compulsion has Synge shaped Deirdre's story to frame his own view of life and love of character! It is by the richness and copiousness of the store of character he brought to drama, that Synge, like the greatest of his predecessors, stays most in the mind. When old blind Martin in the play makes to himself pictures of the comely Molly, his wife has a ready rebuke for him: "Let you not be minding," she says, "if it's flat or rounded she is." With a dramatist's persons, however, it matters everything whether they are flat or rounded; and it is one of the effects of Synge's intensive method, that his people have the highest and most stable clearness, and at the same time some of the "thick rotundity o' the world." A chapter must be reserved to speak of his men and women: something may be said in this place of the way he shaped his plays.

V

Drama begins with retrospect: it is one of its distinctions from the novel. The dramatist cannot set pen to paper till he has looked back over experience, and determined at what precise point to allow it to become explicit in

action. Several of the great novels have begun just anywhere, and found themselves later: a great play, never. Ibsen might have opened Rosmersholm some years earlier, and shown us the first dreadful happening on the bridge, and the White Horses' gradual oncoming, and been the less a dramatist. The best of Shakespeare's plays are those in which least time passes; the Œdipus of Sophocles might be no more supreme a drama than The Winter's Tale, had it opened with a babe's exposure, and suffered time to lapse until he was a man. Shakespeare's instinct was always for "speeding up"—as when he found a Juliet of eighteen who went through a comfortable courtship and marriage, and made her an ardent child for whom four days includes everything of love and its tragic issues. In this at least, his Romantic art might lie down with the Classical. The first of the Unities was quite right, in that that drama is best which marches step by step with time's realities. The journeyman dramatist elects to do without retrospect, because it is easier so, and starts to tell his story where it would be permissible for the novelist to start — at the beginning. Drama has its beginning, but it is the beginning of the end; the curtain never rises on the greatest plays, but we feel the moment itself is a culmi-

nation: deeds have been done and lives lived, that we may now see what we are about to see.

Compare with the opening of the ordinary West-end play of artifice and commerce, the opening of Synge's *Shadow of the Glen*. The curtain up on the one, we see—nothing; then soon maybe a door will open and a menial will enter with something on a salver, and occupy the stage for a minute, and go out through quite a different door; and then, perhaps, through a third door someone will come on who is to have some share in the action, but not any important share,—for the audience have not finished taking their seats yet, so habituated are they to the belief that in the first five minutes of a play nothing ever does happen. If you are in your place, you are very sure that the craftsmanship is all excellent; but the drama promises so little that, if you were asked for your criticism, it might very well be that of Shakespeare's tinker after the first scene of the play he was invited to witness: "'Tis a very excellent piece of work, madam lady: would 'twere done." . . . . The curtain up on the other, we are in the midst of life, and death; a moment to take in the circumstances of the woman who is even now moving about the room amongst the preparations for a changed

life—and there comes the soft knock of the tramp at the door.[1]

To the good dramatist, the only sacrilege is the sacrilege to the stage—to employ it to less than its full effect, in every moment. There are relaxed moments in the plays of Synge—the conclusion to the second act of the *Playboy* is the weakest thing technically Synge put his hand to—but the plays of no dramatist are so inseparable in the mind from a swift economy and a tensity in every inch of their length.[2] *Riders to the Sea* gets so fierce a momentum upon it that Synge's very regard for time is burned up in the flame; but here the appearance of fault might easily have been avoided

[1] Two only of Synge's plays have openings much more leisurely, the *Well of the Saints* and the *Tinker's Wedding;* and they quickly get movement on them. Four of the plays are more or less exactly synchronous with actual time; in the *Playboy* and the *Tinker's Wedding* a night passes; in the *Well of the Saints,* a few days may pass, but they matter no more, in this play, than the centuries which may have passed since its enactment. In one play only, *Deirdre of the Sorrows,* is there a lapse of years, and in that play something of the dramatic value of retrospect is given by the prophecies that have been spoken.

[2] In the course of the plays, it may be noted, there are some five passages in soliloquy. In all but two of these (in the second act of the *Playboy*) it would be impossible to show any relaxation of tensity. Soliloquy, as a technical expedient, would be justifiable if ever in regard to Synge's Irish peasantry, a people who engage their own selves in conversation more than most. But since Synge makes use of it always to reveal character and never to impart knowledge necessary to the action, soliloquy in these plays cannot strictly be regarded as a technical expedient at all.

by a lesser dramatist, for it comes in only with Synge's resolute refusal to "make talk." In its passionate simplicity, the tragedy becomes over-simplified, and reality escapes it.

vi

While Synge has the high simplicity of the elder dramatists, his care for character, and his insight into its subtle places, make him a modern also, in his ability to present those problems of character with which art is more and more concerned. The *Playboy* cannot be called a simple play; if it rightly could, how far more heinous would be the stupidity of those who have gone to it and found nothing in it but a vilification of Ireland. Notwithstanding the play's artful simplicity of form, it presents a very complex interplay of character. Pegeen, for all her capacity for fine reaction against the nullity of her circumstances, is when we first see her, content to marry with Shaneen Keogh; Christy, when he enters for the first time, tired and miserable and dirty, is a simple poor fellow, with the poet and fine fiery fellow potential in him only. Moment by moment, from the time of their paths crossing—for which the first rise of the curtain is the deliberate preparation—Pegeen and Christy are at work one upon the other; until, at the last curtain's fall, we leave them the

same and yet different, never to be the same again. Out of her character, rather than out of her circumstances, Pegeen has created for herself a tragedy; Christy has played his more careless part, and may go now, a likely gaffer, on his way.

If we could stop life at any point and look at it, we should not find it really simple; we may look into our own lives merely, and see the hugger-mugger of motives, good and ill together. It is the business of art, and of the drama most of all the arts, to select from these and to simplify them in presentation; but the greatest artist shows most complexity: Œdipus and Hamlet and Faust are not simple studies. Synge's work is distinct in the memory for its complexity also: for its subtle interweaving of evil and good, of beauty and ugliness—a mingled yarn. "The mind's a wonder," says the Widow Quin, and it is Synge's belief also. No play perhaps has ever been at once so completely a tragedy and a comedy as the *Playboy*. Yet in a consideration of Synge's technique, it is well to notice that never at one time does he put a double emotional demand upon us; herein is the true simplification of the dramatist. One time, after a horse-race on the sands, Synge saw the people in a bad state in the evening. "It was this was the cause of it all," said Danny-boy, his inform-

ant: "they brought in porter east and west from the two towns you know of, and the two porters didn't agree together." Just so a demand for tears from one part of the stage and demand for laughter from another part of the stage, do not agree together.

The delight in sharp contrasts, which we found at its fullest in the *Playboy*, is something quite different, and something perfectly deliberate in Synge. Partly it is the natural expression of his ironic mind, partly a deliberate method of the craftsman with a true sense of the dramatic value of surprise. When Shakespeare introduces us to his Porter pat upon the achievement of Macbeth's dreadful purposes, it is not, as Dr. Johnson surmised, that he is indulging a natural impulse to cut the tragedy and get to the comedy—it is, that he is using an incident in life's smooth and humorous passage deliberately to intensify our tragic mood. In just the same way, the comic stroke of Old Mahon's "Rise up now to retribution, and come on with me," coming sharp upon the expression of Pegeen's grief, does but serve to throw it up more clearly. This homely touch of an old mean man's access of foolish authority now his son is low, is put in with no other purpose than to give, once more, a local human intensity to the shadow of our mood.

For Synge's intermingling of comedy and tragedy is very different from the Elizabethan spreading of a banquet of all the emotions—a dramatic manner often detestable, and in Shakespeare alone lending itself to consciously higher purposes. Throughout the plays, sharp contrast is ever the servant of a heightened reality, or a more delightful surprise. From the sudden moment when blind Martin, if he is a poor dark sinner, has sharp ears enough to send the Saint's can of holy water rocketing across the stage; to that ultimate moment when Conchubor speaks of his triumph and Emain breaks into flames,—surprise is the readiest of dramatic instruments to Synge's hand. For tragic effect, we have seen its use when the dripping body was brought into the cottage kitchen, and the daughter, turning from telling the old mother that it was Michael, for they had a bit of his clothes, uttered her dreadful whisper to the women —"Is it Bartley it is?" Again, there is that sentence of Nora's, the hard girl to please and the hard woman to please, in the crisis of her indecision—"I'm thinking it's myself will be wheezing that time with lying down under the Heavens when the night is cold; but you've a fine bit of talk, stranger, and it's with yourself I'll go." (Has ever such dramatic value been marked by a semicolon?) For

comic effect, we have the tinker woman offering the bundle to the Priest, with self-importance and a sort of pride, "for if it's simple people we are, it's fine cans we can make"; and even while she is boasting of her man's prowess at his trade, the Priest opens the bundle, and out fall the three empty bottles. We have seen the part played by contrast in pointing the naïve extravagance of the playboy, and are now in a position to understand, from its technical side at least, the inclusion of ugliness in Synge's plays. Ugliness is but the shadow to beauty, as ill to good. In making life a mingled yarn, Synge did his duty by reality; and he was very clearly conscious, also, of the intensifying value of its darker strands. Pegeen is not only made to shine very brightly by general contrast with the mean folk about her; the dramatist has set against her, of clear purpose, in the radiancy of her anger, the sheer physical spectacle of Old Mahon crawling upon his knees. Uncompromisingly ugly also, the blow with the empty sack Mary Doul hits Martin when he puts his face out to her to know if he is dimming again. There is ugliness in Pegeen herself, as in her evident delight in the hanging of Jimmy Farrell's dog.—But this will lead us into a study of character, which we may reserve more properly for a following chapter.

It is not by the inclusion of beauty merely, that Synge reconciles us to life's ugliness. Like Deirdre at her tapestry frame, Synge is "a great hand at fancying figures and throwing purple upon crimson, and edging them all times with his greens and gold"; but with the philosopher Tecnicus in Ford's tragedy, he knows also, that:

> No fair colours
> Can fortify a building faintly joined.

Our examination into methods has been in vain, if there has not emerged, above all Synge's other cares, his care for form. Fine form is the reconciler, resolving complexity into clearness, and giving beauty and ugliness a place where they may both inhabit. Balance, measure and patience, these three—"just what the Celt has never had," said Arnold—Synge has. Having them, he may take joy in all that is wild and unsubdued and excessive, and make nevertheless an art that in its suggestion of an ancient order, in its calming and grave beauty, has something in it that is Greek.

vii

The inclusion of ugliness is an affront to some; so that the vision of Old Mahon crawling on his knees, to which his son has hit him, with his head in a dirty bandage marking the place

where his son hit him before, goes for more in the mind than all the beauty of the love-speeches of the playboy. Synge drenched his plays in beauty. Synge, dramatic where the Celt is in general perhaps lyrical, a realist where the Celt is in general romantic, is in nothing so much the Celt as in his sensibility to natural magic. If Matthew Arnold's "four modes of handling Nature"—the conventional, the faithful, the Greek, and the magical—are inclusive and satisfactory, then the last is Synge's mode; as Arnold found it to be the mode, and the chief grace, of the Celt. Natural beauty leaves Synge, leaves his very diction, "trembling and flushed with exultation." We find him writing in his Aran notebook:

> About the sunset the clouds broke and the storm turned to a hurricane. Bars of purple cloud stretched across the sound where immense waves were rolling from the west, wreathed with snowy phantasies of spray. Then there was the bay full of green delirium, and the Twelve Pins touched with mauve and scarlet in the east.
>
> The suggestion from this world of inarticulate power was immense, and now at midnight, when the wind is abating, I am still trembling and flushed with exultation.

This is nothing else than Pater's "emotion of deep delight in the recognition of beauty." How far that mood is from the actual mood of creation, which shall remain exultant and full of passion, but gain a still simplicity,

Pater and Synge, in their different work, both knew. The beauty of the sunset viewed from Aran did not leave Synge, however, "full of the sadness that has fallen upon the mystics"; asking, "How can one be interested in the rising and setting of the sun, and in the work men do under the sun, when the mistress that one loves is hidden behind the gates of death, and it may be behind a thousand gates beside—gate beyond gate?"[1] The sorrow that has fallen upon the mystics is, one thinks, that they can create no more strong beauty. Synge's interest was in the rising and setting of the sun, and in the lives men live under the sun. Consequently for him the stars and moon danced attendance, as they danced for Traherne; Nature was serviceable to him; he "lived with the sunshine, and the moon's delight."

The moon alone, see how it illumines, not an invisible beauty behind the gates of death, but actual life and character. "Lonesome as the moon of dawn"; "grinning your ears off like the moon of May": the sympathetic moon that shines above old tipsy Mary Byrne in her drouth is a "dry moon"; "a little shiny new moon sinking on the hills" is fit accompaniment for Christy and Pegeen, the time love has his

[1] W. B. Yeats on A. E. (Mr. George Russell) in *Treasury of Irish Poetry*.

mastery. Pegeen herself is a girl "any moon of midnight would take pride to meet." Deirdre, since her young girl's eyes first fell on her lover, has been "one time seeing new gold on the stars, and a new face on the moon, and all times dreading Emain." The diplomatist Fergus would "talk the moon over to take a new path in the sky." Deirdre, bowing to an end that's come, is well pleased that they are going forward to Emain "in the winter, the time the sun has a low place, and the moon has her mastery in a dark sky." By the earth, and the sun over it, and the four quarters of the moon, Deirdre swears her Naisi; and Synge, one thinks, would swear by no less, and in that order, like a humanist and not a mystic. The mystic does not look into a little public-house and out at the blueness of the sea and the hills, and find both, as Synge does, alike and equally to have "a splendour that is almost a grief in the mind."

viii

There remains the speech of the plays—the most evident of their beauties, and the chief, perhaps, of their disabilities; if our concern be for the ready absorption of these plays into the common heritage of the English-speaking theatre. For their speech is not the English spoken in England.

Since Pater's death, Mr. George Moore has asserted, "we have seen the English language pass through the patty-pans of Stevenson into the pint-pot of Mr. Kipling." "If we would write with distinction," Mr. Moore went on, in an exordium to a Dublin address delivered a couple of years before Synge's decisive return to that city, "we must do as Pater did, compile a special vocabulary, and strip ourselves of all ideas and words except those which seem to reflect the intimate colour of our minds." If the intimate colour of an artist's mind was not to be found in the language of Mr. Moore's own "realistic" novels—a language which has passed, if we may continue the metaphor, from the pint-pot into the ink-pot—it nevertheless came speedily into the plays of Synge. Mr. Moore's criticism, as usual, was excellent, but in one respect Synge bettered the instruction: he did not so much compile a vocabulary, as find, with his sure and well-trained instinct, a language ready to take the colours of his mind.

English as spoken in Ireland is familiar in literature. The language of Synge's peasants is not the language of Carleton's, nor Banim's, nor Thomas Moore's, nor Lever's, nor Lover's; nor is it nothing but the language of Lady Gregory's "Kiltartan boys" as observed in her demesne at Gort. "Lady Gregory," wrote Mr.

Yeats, in his preface to the first of the volumes in which she began to do for Irish legend what Lady Guest had done for the Welsh, "has discovered a speech as beautiful as that of Morris, and a living speech into the bargain. As she moved about among her people she learned to love the beautiful speech of those who think in Irish, and to understand that it is as true a dialect of English as the dialect that Burns wrote in. It is some hundreds of years old, and age gives a language authority. One finds in it the vocabulary of the translators of the Bible, joined to an idiom which makes it tender, compassionate, and complaisant, like the Irish language itself."[1]

One must give credit also, however, to Dr. Douglas Hyde, who had been before Lady Gregory in making known to readers that had no Irish, the poetry of the Irish country people; freeing it from the "formal eighteenth century style" in which horses were always steeds and cows always kine. Mr. Yeats, again, has praised Dr. Hyde when he writes "in that beautiful English of the country people who remember too much Irish to talk like a newspaper."[2]

Of Una Bhân we may read in The Love Songs of Connaught:

"I had rather be beside her on a couch, ever kissing her,
Than be sitting in heaven in the chair of the Trinity."

[1] Preface to *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*.

[2] Mr. Yeats' Preface to *Love Songs of Connaught* (Dun Emer Press).

and in the *Playboy*, Christy pictures himself to Pegeen: "squeezing kisses on your puckered lips, till I'd feel a kind of pity for the Lord God is all ages sitting lonesome in His golden chair." The folk-imagination of the Irish peasantry shines through Dr. Hyde's versions, through those in prose most clearly: The Pretty Pearl of the White Mountain, I shall not die for thee, The Mannerly Handsome One, and so on. See, however, in the passages put side by side how Synge has done more than "compile a vocabulary," like Dr. Hyde, and written English rendered more interesting by an Irish idiom or phrase.

"If you were to see the star of knowledge and she coming in the mouth of the road, you would say that it was a jewel at a distance from you, who would disperse fog and enchantment. . ." So Courteous Breed, in Dr. Hyde's prose rendering. The speech of Christy the poet is a speech strong and sinewy, coming from the lips with a long unhesitating rhythm, and full of the colour of the dramatist's mind: "Amn't I after seeing the love-light of the star of knowledge shining from her brow, and hearing words would put you thinking on the holy Brigid speaking to the infant saints, and now she'll be turning again, and speaking hard words to me, like an old woman with a

spavindy ass she'd have, urging on a hill." What need for the textual directions to tell us that these words are spoken "in despair and grief"? Despair and grief are in the very cadences.

Synge put a wistfulness and passion of his own into this speech of the Irish peasant, as he thinks in Irish and speaks in English; he made of it a prose of the most beautiful cadences, varied and magical and profound: a fit vehicle for great drama.

For to Coleridge's final test of a blameless style, *untranslatableness*, we may surely add, of dramatic writing, *emotional inevitability:* the good words will carry one colour only, the colour of the speaker's momentary mood. Synge's language flushes and trembles with the dramatist's exultation; it reflects a loneliness that has no equal, or laughter that is genial merely, or a splendour that is almost a grief in the mind.

His manner was not to write a play and then to "put style upon it," like an incantation to perfectness—a way the Celt has, if we may believe Mr. George Moore. Recast and heightened (according to Arnold's demand), the language is the language Synge heard spoken by a peasantry who remember, not only too much Irish, but too good an English, to "speak like a newspaper."

In fact, as well as substance, it is English of the best period, the period when Englishmen were at once translating the Bible and attempting to plant their tongue in Ireland. Can we not hear the psalmist's voice exactly in these words of Synge's Deirdre?—

I have put away sorrow like a shoe that is worn out and muddy, for it is I have had a life that will be envied by great companies. It was not by a low birth I made kings uneasy, and they sitting in the halls of Emain. It was not a low thing to be chosen by Conchubor, who was wise, and Naisi had no match for bravery. It is not a small thing to be rid of grey hairs, and the loosening of the teeth. It was the choice of lives we had in the clear woods, and in the grave we're safe, surely. . . .

In the matter of words, as apart from idiom and fancy, it is beautiful to hear Pegeen the simple poor girl—"I swear to God I'll wed him, and I'll not renege."[1] She has use also for many another old fine word, in her love or in her tempers: *inveigle, bedizened, pandied, leaguing;* and never one comes from her lips but with perfect naturalness upon it. Deirdre is seven years "spancelled" with Naisi; while Martin Doul sees the Saint coming from the "selvage of the wood," and never saw anyone the like of Timmy the smith for "dreepiness."

[1] Compare *Religious Songs of Connaught,* in Dr. Hyde's translation: "'You think that?' said our Saviour. 'Before the cock crows to-night you will reneague me three times.'"

Did Irish people, drunk or sober, ever speak with just the richness and copiousness of Michael James? It does not matter. It is likely, despite Synge's assertion that the wildest sayings in his plays "are tame indeed compared with the fancies one may hear in any little hillside cabin in Geesala, or Carraroe, or Dingle Bay," that the touch of golden alchemy—of which Pater speaks—is on them. In the result, and that is all that matters, we have a speech that is apt for every demand put upon it for character and beauty; an instrument for dramatic expression so fine that it may be at once ecstatic and plaintive, may rise into sudden defiance or sink to a plausible whine, may turn in a moment from easy volubility to the sharpest fear.

VI

MEN AND WOMEN

"I HAVE been accused in certain quarters," wrote Lover, in an address prefixed to Handy Andy, "of giving flattering portraits of my countrymen. Against this charge I may plead that, being a portrait painter by profession, the habit of taking the best view of my subject, so long prevalent in my eyes, has gone deeper, and influenced my mind."

Synge has been accused, in certain quarters, of giving portraits of his countrymen the reverse of flattering. Having no such professional concern as Lover to take them in their "best view," his people have disappointed, and even enraged, those to whom an Irishman is ever a broth of a bhoy, a Handy Andy or a Shaughraun, and no young Irish woman recognizable, except she be moulded in the likeness of the "poor, beautiful, angel-hearted" Colleen Bawn. It is not likely that Samuel Lover, however acceptable his

pictures, was a very good portrait painter; in his concern for the best view he would, unlike Samuel Cooper, have idealized Cromwell's wart into non-existence. His plea, however, in defence of his literary portraiture is at least humorous, like his excellent novels; but a person to whom a Boucicault drama is the highest national romance, is quite passionate and humourless in his short-sightedness.

Synge's art is by no means local; to the appreciation, that is to say, of the store of character that he brought to drama, a knowledge of Ireland is no more necessary than a knowledge of Spain to the appreciation of Don Quixote, or a knowledge of the Highlands to Guy Mannering, or of Wessex to the novels of Mr. Hardy. The difficulty immediately confronting Synge, however, in his own country, was very much like that confronting the authors of Lyrical Ballads a century earlier in England, when they wrote: "Readers accustomed to the inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will perhaps have frequently to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness. . . . It is desirable that readers, for their own sakes, should not suffer the ordinary word poetry, a word of very disputed meanings, to stand in the way of their gratification; but that while they

are perusing the book they should ask themselves if it contains a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents; and if the answer be favourable to the author's wishes, they should consent to be pleased in spite of that most dreadful enemy to our pleasures, established codes of decision."

Synge, with an originality more absolute than Wordsworth's, insisted that his readers should regain their poetic feeling for ordinary life; and presented them with Pegeen with the stink of poteen on her, and a playboy wet and crusted with his father's blood. There is no poetry in poteen, they said, except it go to the tune of Slainte, and Slainte, and Slainte agin; and a gallant young Irishman, in drama, has never been known to win acceptance unless it be an agent or an informer he has killed. These were established codes of decision, a dreadful enemy not only to pleasure in art, but to its making; and they stood in the way of people's gratification by plays containing a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents, unequalled on the stage for their poetic feeling by anything since Shakespeare.[1]

[1] In Ireland *The Playboy of the Western World* has been given some ten or a dozen times only since its original production. This fact is, of course, of no particular importance so long as the play continues to win acceptance in England and America.

ii

"There are some," says Pater, "to whom nothing has any real interest, or real meaning, except as operative in a given person." Synge is one of these. Nothing in the plays is ever argued from a premise. There are some dramatists who see life but as opinions walking; there are no opinions in Synge's plays, but only men and women passionately speaking out their nature.

His confession would have been, one thinks, very like Goldsmith's to Sir Joshua Reynolds: "I should prove myself, at best, an indifferent politician." In a play that did not get beyond its scenario, Synge tried his hand once at the Rebellion of '98, because the members of the company told him that a play on this subject would be a great success. In his play, when he brought it to them, two women, a Protestant and a Catholic, were found to be at refuge in a cave, and there they came to quarrelling about religion. One abused the Pope, and one Queen Elizabeth and Henry VIII, in low voices; for the fear that ruled them was of ravishment, one at the hands of the soldiers and the other at the hands of the rebels. In the end, one woman went away out of the cave, for, rather than stay longer in such wicked company, she would meet any fate.[1] We have not got this play, for Synge,

[1] Mr. Yeats, *J. M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time.*

one fears, was not encouraged to finish it. It is likely that it would have been of very little use to the politicians ; but we are the poorer by two women, who would have been happy hearty human figures, instruments of no party's purposes, but full of their own passionate life.

The women of the plays are a more wide and wonderful gallery than the men. "Young girls," says Molly Byrne, in the first play, quoting the good Saint, with a probable exaggeration of his views, "are the cleanest holy people you'd see walking the world." Certainly Synge, who had a page in his notebook for everyone, loved well to draw them. Molly herself, and the Bride; Cathleen and Nora ; Pegeen Mike and the band of girls who come leaguing with the playboy, Sara Tansey, Susan Brady, and Honor Blake—sharp little portraits each of them ; and the young careless Deirdre, when she has no thought but for her beauty and to be straying on the hills: "was there ever the like of Deirdre for a happy and a sleepy Queen?" In the notebooks also, there is the little Hostess, who sat taking out her hairpins and combing her hair, while Synge, as he finished each letter, had to say whom it was to, where the people lived, if they were married or single, how many children they had, and to make a guess at how many pounds they spent in the year, and at the

number of their servants. She gave much to Pegeen, but she retains her own clear and lovable individuality, as she washes her jugs and teacups, alone with Synge in the house, "breathing audibly, with a sort of simple self-importance." There is the girl not half through her 'teens, but yet with her imagination coloured by disillusion, who thought priests queer people, and didn't know who wasn't, and the mainland a queer place, and didn't know the place that wasn't; and there is that other girl of the Aran chimney corner, that "wonderfully humorous girl," who loved to pile up diminutives and repeat adjectives with a great scorn of syntax, and who gave Synge his orders that he was to marry a rich wife with plenty of money, and if she died on him, to come back here and marry herself for his second wife: she gave much to Pegeen also. Then of girls that have grown into women, there is that other Nora, who never knew what it was to have fear of beggar or bishop or any man at all, but only of life passing without fulfilment; and the Deirdre, turned a woman, who was able to find no safe place for her love on the ridge of the world. There are the Widow Quin, and Sarah Casey. Then comes the little group of older women, Mary Doul and Mary Byrne, old Maurya and Lavarcham, and the Old Woman who cooked and

tended for the High King. Sharp in the memory also is the old woman of the house who cared for Synge on Aran, and brought him his tea at three o'clock instead of six when the wind was from the south, because the shadow of the door-post no longer moved across the kitchen floor to indicate the hour; she remains with all her kindly and simple charm, with many another, a figure of the notebooks only.

The young men are Christy, quite the most remarkable, but still inferior in delightful perfectness of realization to his Pegeen; Bartley, who goes to his death, and the Tramp who goes out with Nora to find what life may have to offer; Michael Dara and Shawn Keogh, poor fellows both, but with a richness in their folly; Naisi and Ainnle and Ardan, not much more than mere brave young fellows. Then there are Timmy the smith and Michael Byrne. Alone stands Michael James, that decent man of Ireland — a great figure of pure comedy, Synge's Sir Toby, evidence that Synge might one day have made a Falstaff. Jimmy Farrell, fat and amorous, and Philly O'Cullen, thin and mistrusting, stand smaller behind him. The old men are always successful—Martin Doul and Old Mahon, Dan Burke and Conchubor. Fergus is a disappointment, the nearest to a lay figure in the plays; Owen, the spy, lives in the

memory if for one saying only, "It's a poor thing to be so lonesome, you'd squeeze kisses on a cur dog's nose." There is a little group of holy men; the fine Saint who had no humour, Father Reilly, whom we do not see, but whom we know as if we did, and the Priest who suffered at the irreverent hands of the tinkers. Patch Darcy, that fine man, we know only in retrospect; but him too we feel we know without seeing; after the manner of the young girl who lost her shyness with Synge as she travelled beside him in a railway train, and cried out every time he showed her some new feature of the country as it began to appear through the dawn, "Oh, it's lovely, but I can't see it."

The Irish intellect, Mr. Yeats says, has always been preoccupied with the weak and with the poor. He is inclined to contrast the art of his own country with that of England, with her concern for the Empire and the ideals of the strong and wealthy; to the latter's disadvantage. Certainly the preoccupation of the London theatre has been with the life of the stalls folk (in the interests of the pit); Earls have been ten for a shilling there, and if a man's income must be mentioned, it has not been considered decent to refer to it in terms of anything less than thousands. Nowadays the poor are becoming popular; no West-end drawing-room,

it seems, is complete (on the stage) without a wastrel from the Embankment or a superseded cabman fetched in from an adjacent rank. It cannot yet be claimed for the London stage that it is free from the "nullity of the rich and the squalor of the poor"—as Synge claimed for the life he found on Aran. Later, when he undertook a journey through the congested districts of Connemara on behalf of an English newspaper, and wrote, in a haste which was not his by nature, what remains the poorest of his journals, but which has an interest in that it shows him strong in the defence of the small farmer, and of the Irish peasantry in general, he said: "Nearly all the characteristics which give colour and attractiveness to Irish life are bound up with a social condition that is near to penury."

All the people of Synge's plays are of a social condition that is near to penury, if we set aside the tragedy of *Deirdre;* in which even, the High King comes walking with a single friend, and has domestic arrangements of the simplest. Not an Earl could purchase admission to their ranks with all his rent-roll; not a landlord even, although Synge himself wrote of the material for drama in the dying away of many of the old families.

There are beggars, a tramp, tinkers, islanders engaged in daily warfare with the sea for the

morrow's needs; herds, a small publican, and petty farmers and squatters; a Saint who goes walking on his two bare feet, and a Priest who is hardly a prosperous priest and lives in great fear of his bishop. Dan Burke leaves a "fine sum" behind him when he shams to be dead, but it does not take long in the counting; he is a farmer and herd, an independent man, with sheep on the back hills, but hardly a wealthy. The aristocrat, Michael James, makes a living for himself and daughter, by selling a ha'porth of starch to the Widow (on the rarest occasions) and porter to every living Christian. Jimmy Farrell owns a creel cart, but found it expedient, as Pegeen well remembers, to hang his dog to save paying for the licence, "himself swearing it was a dead dog, and the peelers swearing it had life." It is likely that Shawn Keogh, of Killakeen, with his blue bull, and his ewes and his mountainy ram, and his drift of heifers, is the greatest man, in point of economic independence; but all the satisfaction he gets of it, is Pegeen's advice that he should leave troubling her, and go find his match. Pegeen herself is radiantly clear about life's values; she wouldn't give a thraneen for a lad who hadn't a mighty spirit and a gamey heart. It is little she will think, when the airs are warm and she and her lover are pacing

Neifin in the dews of night, if his love is a poacher's, or an earl's itself. . . .

In a word, Synge's characters are "low"; in the exact sense of the important showman in Goldsmith's comedy, who said, "O damn anything that's *low*," and danced his bear to the very genteelest of tunes, Water Parted, or the minuet in Ariadne.

There are no children in the plays, and no animals, save the tinker's ass, which Synge was good enough dramatist to keep out of sight, in the ditch where the bits of clothes are drying.

iii

Pegeen Mike is one of the most beautiful and living figures in all drama. Twenty and more years of age, she is (in her own opinion) the fright of seven townlands for her biting tongue. "It's a terror to be aged a score," says the Widow, who has buried her children and destroyed her man; but Pegeen is a great hand also at coining funny nicknames for the stars of night, and it is likely, as Christy supposes, that the little infant children come pestering her steps. Like the little Hostess who was so taken with the photographs Synge showed her that had babies in their foreground, we may see that Pegeen has her full share of the passion for children which, Synge states, is

powerful in all women who are "permanently and profoundly attractive."

When we see her first, she is writing, with much painful exactitude, the order for her wedding clothes in which to marry with Shawn Keogh. He is a poor thing, with no savagery or talk at all; but he is her own. Into her life, comes walking from the west or south her playboy. Her life is not very full of incident: "you'd be ashamed this place, going up winter and summer with nothing worth while to confess at all," to Father Reilly. She has twice the tenderness and feeling, and twice the severity and daring, of Sara Tansey, who yoked the ass cart and drove ten miles to set her eyes on the man who bit the yellow lady's nostril on the northern shore; but it is likely she has had to content herself with the same limited amusements. When Jimmy Farrell finds the reticent Christy, at his first entry, an excitement, he can compare him only, to their disadvantage, with Dan Davies' circus, or the holy missioners making sermons on the villiany of man. These, it is likely, have been the greatest incidents of Pegeen's life also, on this wild coast of Mayo; she has listened to a lad, maybe, at her father's bar after coming from harvesting in the Liverpool boat, telling of the wonders they have in the city of Dublin.

And now drops into her life, at dusk of an autumn evening, a lad who has, under great provocation and with every circumstance of attendant glory, split the skull of his own father.

Pegeen is entirely right in her own feelings on the subject. She has never killed her father (although Michael James, drunk or sober, is a father likely to annoy a girl of Pegeen's spirit)—she would be afraid to do that. But she recognizes, with Philly, that the heart's a wonder; and knows, or thinks she knows in her ardent mind, what it may be capable of when blind rages are tearing it within. More, she sees at once that Christy is a poet; and the poets, she has heard at all times, are fine, fiery fellows with great rages when their temper's roused. Very soon Christy is laced securely in her heartstrings, for he is a personable lad, and any girl would walk her heart out before she'd meet a young man who was his like for eloquence or talk at all. When to poet's talking he adds bravery of heart (for "Good rider!" even Old Mahon has to cry, when he looks out at the window and sees Christy with the mule he has, kicking the stars), Pegeen's cup of joy is full. There is the lovely scene between them.

Pegeen is not to drink, however; life has not brought her fulfilment. The entry of Old

Mahon stays the cup at her lips, and, when she knows Christy has lied to her, she dashes it down. Nature never framed a woman's heart of prouder stuff than that of Pegeen Mike. "It's lies you told, letting on you had him slitted, and you nothing at all." It is characteristic of her proud heart, that when her playboy proves not to be all he had claimed and she had thought him, he should at once be nothing. She is back in a sentence, she who had been "talking sweetly," to the Pegeen of the biting tongue; the Pegeen who had relish for the story of Jimmy Farrell's dog hanging screeching from the licence. All the ardency of her nature, that has gone a moment before into her love talk, goes now into seeing him "pandied." She it is, finely, tragically resolved, who blows the fire to scorch his shins, and drops the rope over him when all the men are drunk or afraid. She speaks and acts with exaggerated vehemence, in her fear lest she shall break into tears. Only when Christy is gone, and cannot hear her, does she break out into wild lamentation for the joy that has passed her by. "Be moderate, be moderate," would be the advice of the men over their drinks; and her reply the same as that of Cressida to old Pandarus:

> My love admits no qualifying dross
> No more my grief, in such a precious loss.

Free of her tongue and ready with her hands, ardent in her loves and her sorrows, "fiery and magnificent and tender," Pegeen is the living embodiment of all that Synge loved in life. "There is surely a piece of divinity in her, something that was before the elements, and owes no homage under the sun": this girl with the stale stink of poteen on her, from serving in the bar.

Pegeen is the normal: "I'm not odd," she says, in contradistinction from her playboy. It is like Pegeen, when she has lost her hero, to find him nothing but an ugly liar and the fool of men. But Christy Mahon, liar it may be, is not an ugly liar, and no mere fool. Christy is a study in the artist nature, as deliberate as Mr. Shaw's Dubedat, or Shakespeare's second King Richard. Our sketch of the play in an earlier chapter has sufficed to show that he is no common weekday kind of a murderer,—as even the Widow sees.

It is probable, when Christy set off walking from that cold, sloping, stony, devil's patch of a potato field, that he left Old Mahon for dead; it is certain that he did not stay to feel the last gasps quitting his heart, as Philly did, when the playboy hit his father for the second time. Eleven days' walking, from Munster into Mayo, with genuine fear lurking behind every

bush and hedge, and deep lonesomeness in his heart, has left the lad in a poor state, when he ventures into the village shebeen. It is important to note that he tells no lies; he is guilty of embroidery only, and that not until he is flattered, by their evident admiration, into the belief that he has done "something big." That he, whom there wasn't anyone heeding in that naked parish saving only the dumb beasts of the field,—"not the girls itself, and I won't tell you a lie"—that he, Christy Mahon, should find in an evening the respect of strong men, and a radiant girl to tell him that he is a fine handsome young fellow with a noble brow! "Is it me?" cries Christy, with a flash of delighted surprise; and from this moment, and this moment only, is embarked on the gallous jaunt that leaves him a likely gaffer in the end of all.

"Up to the day I killed my father," he says, "there wasn't a person in Ireland knew the kind I was"; but in this he shows the capacity for self-deception of the poet; it was up to the day Pegeen made a man of him, with the treasures of her love, that he remained the quiet, simple, poor fellow, with no man giving him heed. This capacity for self-deception is the key to an understanding of the playboy. When he is told it is something big he has

done, he is willing to believe it; when, moved to genuine self-expression by Pegeen's unconcealed compassion, he speaks wonderfully of the eleven long days he has been wandering the world,—"looking over a low ditch or a high ditch on my north or south, into stony, scattered fields, or scribes of bog, where you'd see young limber girls, and fine, prancing women making laughter with the men"—and Pegeen finds him to be the like of the poets, how quick he is to take himself at her valuation! Had he been aware of the poets, he might have said:

> She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
> And I loved her that she did pity them.

There is a shining sincerity almost like Othello's in these love scenes.

The progress of his confidence in the new character of playboy,—a greatness in which he was not born, nor achieved for himself, but which was thrust upon him, if ever in comedy greatness was thrust upon man—is marked very clearly and with a deliciously naïve humour, in the progressive stages by which the deed of patricide increases, the deed by which he grew a man. At first, almost apologetically, he "just riz the loy and let fall the edge of it on the ridge of his skull." Next, in the privacy of Pegeen's compassionate tenderness, and after brooding on the bitter life his father led him, he

"did up a Tuesday and halve his skull." Then, flourishing in the open-eyed wonder of the young girls and the Widow, the story takes on fresh glories, and he "hit a blow on the ridge of his skull, laid him stretched out, and he split to the knob of his gullet." When Shawn's new clothes are upon him, and he is swaggering openly in the admiration of all sorts who are bringing him their food and clothing, he is "a gallant orphan cleft his father with one blow to the breeches belt." Below the belt, the blow could hardly go; so, sharp upon this utterance, comes in Old Mahon, with a dirty plaster on his head. In strict accuracy, Christy *had* "just riz the loy" and let fall the edge of it on the ridge of his father's skull. Christy is the true artist in temperament:

> When he's up, he's up,
> And when he's down, he's down,

and now he is merely speechless with rage at his old father coming in here laying desolation between himself and the fine women of Ireland. He is ready to promise the Widow anything in return for her aid, and, better in spirits again at once, to swear it by the elements and stars of night. After the sports, when everything falls lucky to his hands, he hasn't a thought but for to win Pegeen, and he is all eloquence and rapture; the qualm of dread is Pegeen's only.

His spirits are lowered for a moment when Michael James returns home drunk from the wake, and is for talking genially of Christy's poor father rotting beyond; but for a moment only. The next, he is all fierceness towards the craven Shawn, and coaxing persuasion to Michael; and the decent man is joining their hands, for "a daring fellow is the jewel of the world, and a man did split his father's middle with a single clout should have the bravery of ten"; when back comes Old Mahon, like a weasel tracing a rat. Christy, for a magnificent moment, disowns his father; then, the crowd turning against him, he falls into one of his less happy efforts, but still magnificent in its audacity: "It's himself was a liar, lying stretched out with an open head on him, letting on he was dead." Pegeen turns against him, and in a second he is abjectly piteous: "let you save me from the old man." Finding her compassionate tenderness now all dried at its spring, there is nothing for it but another deed of desperation; and in a moment he is flying at Old Mahon again with the loy. In vain; Christy, dispirited, suffers himself to be taken in the hangman's rope, thinking Pegeen's pity must then be moved. Instead, she takes the leading part in taunting him, and scorching his shins. That settles Christy. "You're blowing for to torture

me. That's your kind, is it?" His thoughts are no more for the girl who has had him laced in her heart-strings; but for the playboy only, and his new-won reputation, and that he may have a gay march down to a gallant end. The reappearance of Old Mahon cannot throw him from this mood; if the end is not to be a royal judgment in the courts of law, it shall be romancing through a romping lifetime, with himself master of all fights from now. "Go on, now," he says to his father, giving him a cut with the hangman's rope; and out they go together. That moral indignation should have vented its precious self, from Dublin to Philadelphia, on the pair of them!

The danger facing Synge in writing the *Playboy* was that, in his concentration upon Pegeen and her fine reaction, he should fail to make Christy a credible object of her love. There would then have been false psychology, as there is false psychology in that early comedy of Shakespeare, when Valentine offers to forgo Sylvia in the interests of his friend; or false values, like Bertram's worthlessness and Helena's stubborn love in All's Well. But Synge did not fall into falsity; because his chief care was always for character.

iv

Of course there is this difficulty in reading Synge's people as one runs, from one's stall to the supper-table, or to the box-office to demand one's money back: that they do not, like the people familiar to the modern theatre, all talk alike. Every one of them is busy, according to his or her character, in putting their own interpretation upon persons or events; and, added to this, they do it in the terms of a popular imagination a little robust and difficult to minds accustomed to a drama in which "the springtime of the local life has been forgotten."

What is Synge's own opinion? playgoers are inclined at the end of the performance to ask. Are we to find the playboy a little schemer making up a story he destroyed his da (with the Widow Quin); or a poet and a hero (with Pegeen); or an ugly young blackguard, and a dirty, stuttering lout (with his father); or an ugly liar who was playing off the hero (with Pegeen again); or (as he found himself) "a kind of wonder was jilted by the heavens when a day was by"? Synge hid his meanings deep. Like all good dramatists, he has no opinion, other than the opinions of his people. Was Shakespeare of opinion that

Hamlet was mad?—we do not know, we only know that this was Polonius' opinion. Was Falstaff a coward? Was Malvolio a fool? The best drama is full of the opportunity for such questions; what they did, what they said, is there, for those that will stay to read it; theirs, not the dramatist's, to form opinions: unless, like Ben Jonson or Mr. Shaw, it pleases the dramatist to do it, and to affix the opinion in a neat label round the neck of the person; but Malvolio, who may or may not have been entirely a fool, and an amorous fool, remains a living person for the imagination to find pleasure in, long after Sir Amorous La-Foole has ceased to employ it.

Synge's characters, like Shakespeare's, are subject to no such false simplification; nor are his plots "improbable by an excess of consistency," like Ben Jonson's. If you were to have been in the village shebeen between the coming and going of the playboy, you would not, when "a day was by," have known anything more of Christy and Pegeen, of Michael and Old Mahon, of Jimmy and Philly, of Shawn and the Widow and the girls, than what they had contrived to do and say—an amazing amount, since Synge is the dramatist. On the wild coast of Mayo, they have not the convenience of the telephone, into which they may confide, at the rise of the

curtain, the date of their birth and their number in family. Nor is Synge within hailing distance of the dramatists, accepted as masters in London and Paris and New York, who will seat two of their persons at a table and put them to regaling one another with reminiscences of the past (which we must listen to patiently if our evening's pleasure is to have any culmination), with many phrases of half-apologetic introduction, such as "You will remember——," and, "Can I ever forget, my dear Duke——?"

We have noticed already, on more than one occasion in these chapters, Synge's power of creating the illusion of reality, by touches that are not at first sight essential, but that are in fact essential to a full and living appreciation of character and incident. Thus the Widow Quin is unforgettably real to us; we have half a dozen sharp pictures of her, contriving in her little gardens, sitting lone by her dry hearth with her glass at night, contriving again to get a right of way, a mountain ram, and a load of dung at Michaelmas from her cousin Shawn; but the Widow passes out of sight, and we never have an opportunity of forming an opinion upon the exact degree of her culpability in that little matter of the deceased husband whom she hit with a rusted pick. Nor is the task of those whose pleasure it is to visit the creations of art

with their moral indignation or endorsement, nicely calculated, made any simpler by this first characteristic of Synge's people we have noted—their resolute individualism, and passionate determination to put each his own interpretation upon circumstances. Thus even the Widow's house, let alone the Widow's character, has its mysteries, since to herself it is "my little houseen a perch off on the rising hill," and to Pegeen, in her tempers, it is a pigsty, whose "leaky thatch is growing more pasture for her buck-goat than her square of fields." This evasiveness, not inconsistent at the same time with the most actual reality, is a characteristic of Synge's people; it finds its origin in their wilful love of passionate, impetuous, fully-personalized speech. In the impersonal speech of modern drama it is simple for a dramatist to make his play clear as a proposition in Euclid; and equally without life.

Was the tinker woman audacious merely, when she accused the devil of hooshing the can from the bundle; or was the half of her nature filled with sudden superstitious fear, sincere and unmistakable as the belief of Cathleen and Nora in the black hags "that do be flying on the sea"? Did the lonesome woman of the glen really think, for a moment, that her husband

was risen from the dead? And Pegeen, clear-eyed Pegeen, did she think, in the sudden moment of her disillusion, that her playboy's father had come to menace her happiness from the same dreadful destination? The heart's a wonder. Goldsmith inscribed his comedy to Dr. Johnson, in order to take that opportunity of informing mankind that the greatest wit may be found in a character without impairing the most affected piety. Similarly, the most complete familiarity may go with the completest awe. To picture the Lord God sitting lonesome in His golden chair, while lovers are squeezing kisses on puckered lips, is by no means irreverent in Christy; it is the grotesque realism of faith. It is what Synge, in regard to a girl on Aran, calls "the innocent realism of childhood." Michael James drunk is more than ever conversant with the will of God. The characters in the plays, like the scenes, are built much upon contrast.

Like Goldsmith's rustics, whom he set in an English village of the plains, but remembered from the village of his own birth in the West of Ireland, Synge's people are

> Fierce in their native hardiness of soul
> True to imagined right, above control.

They are great people at their "rights." Michael and Sarah have a good right, the old

tinker woman is willing to concede, to be walking out the short while they are young; "but if they have itself, they'll not keep Mary Byrne from her full pint when the night's fine, and there's a dry moon in the sky." Deirdre, come to Emain in fulfilment of an end that was foretold, looks with displeased pride at the shabby hangings of the tent where Conchubor has lodged her and Naisi; for, if they are at the edge of the grave itself, "we want what is our right in Emain." Martin Doul and Mary Doul are well content in their blindness, "for it's ourselves have a right to the crossing roads, and we don't want any of your bad tricks, or your wonders either, for it's wonder enough we are ourselves." There is a fine hardy tolerance in these plays, where each and all may move freely and speak out their minds—if they have the hardihood—and win for themselves the right to be thought a wonder. Intimacy with Synge's people is a fine school for character.

In their effort after distinction, they love to go one better. It was a fine wake across the sands, where Michael James drank a smart drop to the glory of Kate Cassidy's soul; "for you'd never see the match of it for flows of drink, the way when we sunk her bones at noonday in her narrow grave, there were five men, aye, and six men, stretched out retching speechless

on the holy stones." The progress of Christy's gallant blow, from the ridge of his father's skull to his breeches belt, by easy stages, is governed by the same amiable desire to do a little bit better every time. When Old Mahon reproves his son for making free in his speech, "Leave troubling the Lord God," says he. "Would you have Him sending down droughts, and fevers, and the old hen and the cholera morbus?" See the readiness of Synge's people, in the same spirit of self-aggrandizement, to personalize *sensations*. When Sara Tansey, that eager spirit, came first thing in the morning to set her eyes on the playboy—just as she drove tin miles to see the man who bit the yellow lady's nostril—the first thing she came up against, very naturally since he had not yet completed his toilet, was the playboy's boots. First she smelt them.

SARA.—That's bog water, I'm thinking; but it's his own they are, surely, for I never seen the like of them for whitey mud, and red mud, and turf on them, and the fine sands of the sea. That man's been walking, I'm telling you.

She was disappointed that it wasn't blood on them; however, no sooner did she decide that it was bog water only, than her limber girl's mind ran on to paint the murderous boots in further pretty colours. Never had

she, Sara Tansey, seen such boots; never had a man walked so far, she gave you *her* word; and then, to make the excitement even more exquisitely personal, she put on the boots. Was ever anything more childlike and extravagant and true? This was the girl who, the moment she heard Christy was put down for the sports, bet her dowry that he'd lick the world.

The tendency of Synge's people, also, is to tell all out—it is shown in Sara's voluble tongue running on about the boots; and it is shown again in the next speech of her companion Nelly, a shyer girl: "And I brought you a little laying pullet—boiled and all she is—was crushed at the fall of night by the curate's car. Feel the fat of that breast, mister." The tongue of the English peasant girl would not run on so fast, with a deliberate eagerness to make all clear, complete and acceptable. Every person in all Synge's plays talks so. In the room where we sit to hear them, it is the way for one to speak and be silent, then for another to speak and be silent, each in turn wonderfully vivid and eager and fluent, but with an ability to listen singularly un-English: the interruptions, the broken speeches, in the plays are very few, very much fewer than in a play of Shakespeare. "Talking out with

swearing Christians"—that is Christy's ideal of a fine life. Not so do Mr. Hardy's English peasants speak; there is a slower relish in the good things of Joseph Poorgrass, and of that "very rare old spectacle," the Malter. The playboy is not alone in the audacity of his speech, nor in his power of cumulative vituperation, which, directed against an only father, shocks even the Widow. For fertility and resource, and a power to pile image on image, Pegeen, at her noisiest, is nearly his equal:

It's true the Lord God formed you to contrive indeed. Doesn't the world know you reared a black ram at your own breast, so that the Lord Bishop of Connaught felt the elements of a Christian, and he eating it after in a kidney stew? Doesn't the world know you've been seen shaving the foxy shipper from France for a threepenny bit and a sop of grass tobacco would wring the liver from a mountain goat you'd meet leaping the hills?

To all of which the Widow listens with polite amusement, and, at the end of it, replies with a mere unsurprised "Do you hear her now, young fellow?" For cumulative humour, it would be hard to beat this from poor Shawn in his desperation:

Oh, Widow Quin, what'll I be doing now? I'd inform again him, but he'd burst from Kilmainham and he'd be sure and certain to destroy me. If I wasn't so God-fearing, I'd near have courage to come behind him and run a pike into his side. Oh, it's a hard case to be an

orphan and not to have your father that you're used to, and you'd easy kill and make yourself a hero in the sight of all.

This gets the greatest laugh of all in the theatre, indeed it is one of the classic laughs of comedy already; but the humour is all against Shawn: the masterly use of antithesis in the passage, and the sense in it of the humour of sudden contrast, are his creator's, and serve to show how near we are all the time in this discussion of characters, to our previous consideration of dramatic ways and means. In the same spirit, we may note the unerring refinement of effect in the dialogue of pure comedy, such as the passage between the Widow Quin and Old Mahon already given,[1] and see how, when Synge's characters cease to talk out, and come to "give-and-take" at close quarters, they speak very like Shakespeare's, in the same mood:

HAMLET. Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in the shape of a camel?

POLONIUS. By the mass, and 'tis like a camel, indeed.

HAMLET. Methinks it is like a weasel.

POLONIUS. It is backed like a weasel.

HAMLET. Or like a whale?

POLONIUS. Very like a whale.

Another trait in their speech, in this mood, is its uncompromising directness. "Is my visage

[1] Quoted p. 75.

astray?" asks Old Mahon, and the Widow replies, "It is then. You're a sniggering maniac, a child could see." Mary Doul, asked for her opinion on her husband on whom she has just set her eyes, thinks it's a poor thing that the Lord God should give her sight and put the like of that man in her way.

Their language is generally forcible, often splendid; to them, as to Mr. Hardy's peasantry, "unholy exclamations is a necessity of life." There is a spirit in Synge's diction, free and ardent and ungovernable, that has not its equal outside the best plays of the Restoration. His lovers have "fine fancies, wonderous fine fancies"—and even when Synge translates Walter Von der Vogelweide, he puts words into his mouth that might have been spoken by Loveless of his Berinthia. "I tell you," says the disappointed lover, "if I could have laid my hands on the whole set of the stars, the moon and the sun along with it, by Christ I'd have given the lot to her."

V

It was, to be sure, the "vivifying spirit of excess" to which Ernest Renan pointed, in writing of the Celtic genius; and Arnold—the other writer who, while loving not so much the Celtic peasantry as their poetry, has identified

himself with the endeavour to appraise their qualities—paid handsome tribute to their sense of style. Both alike have found the cue and motive in the Celt to be his need of illusion. He is, says Arnold, a sentimentalist—"always ready to react against the despotism of fact." If he get drunk, says Renan—and goes on to add that he does so very often—his drunkenness "is due to this invincible need of illusion."

Certainly Michael James drunk is in some subtle way a more distinguished person than Michael James sober. His daughter's reaction against the despotism of fact is not in the least sentimental: sentimentality is dissipated emotion, and Pegeen's is all girt up and swift to its destination and as swiftly withdrawn: but it is the illusion of a brave lover, and of a life different from "this place," that she grasps and loses. It is their invincible need of illusion that gives to the people of these plays their love of *distinction*. When Martin Doul, sitting blinded at the cross-road, remembers the time when he had sight, it is his "fine sight" he remembers. When he is forced to abandon the belief that Mary Doul is "a wonder for looks," it is by a simple transition she becomes "the maddest female woman is walking the counties of the east." At all times he has a great ear for hearing the lies in a word. To the Irish peasant, "Nothing common

seems, or mean", so only that it concerns himself. When old tipsy Mary condescends to tell a story in the ditch, it is "the finest story you'd hear any place from Dundalk to Ballinacree, with great queens in it, making themselves matches from the start to the end, and they with shiny silks on them the length of the day, and white shifts for the night." Conchubor, the High King, has the same naïve extravagance in his self-respect as Michael James the publican: "the like of me has a store of knowledge that's a weight and a terror." "Amn't I a great wonder?" asks Old Mahon, with some pride, when he takes off his hat and shows the Widow the rent in his crown. In just the same spirit, an old man on Aran, who had been ill, took Synge out and down the road, to show him how far they could hear him yelling "the time he had a pain in his head."

This contentment, however, at being a great wonder, is the philosophy of the old. When Lavarcham comes to Deirdre with her consolation, "You'll be a great wonder they'll call the queen of sorrows," Deirdre is not satisfied; and Lavarcham cannot understand. The young people, with fine qualities unsubdued, are always striving in Synge's plays, while the old people, and the people cast in a meaner mould, are easily satisfied. Jimmy, going out after

Philly for the pleasure of seeing him turned upon by Old Mahon, who is away in his head, is the duplicate of Shakespeare's Launce: "I'll after, to rejoice in the boy's correction." The crowd in the *Playboy* are wishful only to look on at a sensation; if a father and son set to fighting, it will lick the world. They hurrah with the winning cause, like Shakespeare's crowds, and run without shame from the prospect of its overthrow; but Synge loves in them, one feels, their quality of riot even though they have no daring.

It will "lick the world"—for the world is a familiar image to these people, to be used much as Sara used the boots, for the distinguishment of the individual. Molly, that clean holy person, a young girl, is to be seen walking the "world," nothing less; while "all roads spread on the world" are for the feet of blind Martin. Lavarcham, in the eyes of the Old Woman, is a "great wonder for jogging back and forward through the world"; and when Lavarcham finds Deirdre and Naisi clinging to each other, and remembers the fate that is foretold, "Are you choosing this night," she asks, "to destroy the world?" Synge's is a proper drama, of supreme moments; of moments when the quietest of us has wildness in the joy of our illusion; those nights of which Naisi speaks,

"when a king like Conchubor would spit upon his arm ring, and queens will stick their tongues out at the rising moon."

All Synge's people, indeed, are, in their moments of crisis, on a place where their tongues often take them, the "ridge of the world." We think of the "utter loneliness and desolation" that seemed to Synge to give to the little group of men and girls on a Kerry cliff-top, as to all these people of the West, their finest and clearest qualities; and again of the sense of loneliness that had no equal that came to him in the glen in Wicklow, and intensified the bird-song so that it seemed to fill the valley with sound. We have found this utter intensity in all his art.

vi

His people's love of distinction gives us the type motive in Synge's drama. It is in essence a simple enough antagonism; and yet, since it takes its rise in character rather than circumstance, it is sometimes buried deep. It is always, in its own way, a tragic motive.

In Greek drama, the antagonism is between the will of man and the will of the gods, and the gods win always; when their will is achieved, the play comes to an end. The motive to Shakespeare's tragic drama has been defined

very well by Mr. Masefield as the punishment, or purging, of a mind "obsessed." Here, the gods have been dethroned, or rather absorbed into the general life, and into the texture of the plot; no longer extraneous arbiters, they still personify the general will, and individuals, howsoever noble in their transgression, must go down before them. They are not maleficent, nor capricious merely; the motive to Othello, the most anguishing and beautiful of all tragedies, is less the machinations of the evil and mean, than the excessive presence in the tragic figures of qualities that in themselves are fine and noble; really, such magnificent singleness of mind as Othello's, and such heart-wringing innocence as Desdemona's, will not do in a complex world. Meredith's statement fits the Shakespearean case:

> No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:
> We are betrayed by what is false within.

The tragedy of Othello could get along very well without Iago. It remained for Mr. Hardy to make a Shakespearean side-remark, that the gods "kill us for their sport," the motive to great drama: Shakespeare never did so, in his internal tragedy of the Mind. In Ibsen's social tragedy, the gods are in their proper place, within the dramatic scheme, and not outside it; but there is this new element of seeming

pessimism, that the arbitrament is often with the mean. Hedda Gabler's reaction is the reaction of the excessive against the mean-souled; it is in essence a fine reaction; but in Ibsen's tragedy there is less of exultation than in the finest. A general motive common to all good tragedy may be found, perhaps,—in the antagonism of the abnormal with the normal. The normal wins, in the sense that Œdipus, Othello, Hedda are forced out of life; as it is bound to do, if life is to go on; but the normal people are not uninfluenced by the tragic sacrifice, as every good dramatist takes care to show. The heads of Tesman and Mrs. Elvsted, at work together in the light of the reading lamp, are the truly final issue of Ibsen's tragedy, not the pistol shot, nor the Judge's much-quoted cynicism. "Even through the hollow eyes of death", we must spy life peering. In the influence of the tragic mood, a mood of abnormality, upon the normal people in the play, lie tragedy's purgative, and tragedy's exultant delight; for every good audience is an audience of normal people.

With some such definition of true tragic drama, all Synge's work complies. The motive to his drama is in the resolute individuality of his people, their wish to achieve distinction. None in his plays, if we except Conchubor the High King, are born great; none, save in the purest

spirit of comedy, have greatness thrust upon them; each is for himself, winning an easy or a cruel end. All the fine people are "lonesome" people, and the antagonism is between their will to be "a wonder," and the "lonesomeness" of life; between the ambition for self-realization and the nullity of circumstance. The poor souls are easily satisfied—Old Mahon with the distinction of having seven doctors writing out his sayings in a printed book; the Widow Quin with her load of dung and her right of turbary (if ever she got them); Dan Burke and the hesitant Michael with a long life, and a quiet life, and a little taste of the stuff. The passing of life without fulfilment, the ceaseless fading of beauty, the elusive quality of happiness, the agony of disillusion —these are the tragic undercurrents of the plays. A minor tragedy, if you will; product of a tragic mood taking some part of its origin directly in the life Synge found, a little sad and depleted, in the West of Ireland; but who will say that its truth is not universal?

All Synge's people have "a share of the desolation that is mixed everywhere with the supreme beauty of the world." Pegeen is lonesome, but happiness seems to come to her, and she reaches out for it, and it eludes her. Christy is lonesome—"lonesome

as the moon of dawn"—and he finds himself a wonder; but not such a great wonder in the end, when he goes out to be a tramp upon the road. Nora, the lonesome woman of the glens, finds happiness—"If it's ever happy we are, stranger"—and loses it, thinks to find happiness again, and goes out with that other tramp upon the road. Deirdre finds happiness, and loses it—as she knew that she must lose it. Maurya, in the rather different tragedy where the plain antagonist is the sea, speaks out of the same consciousness of happiness passing, "No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied." Sarah, the tinker's doxy, thinks her happiness to lie in the distinction of marriage, reaches out for it, and it escapes her. The two blind beggars, in the other play where the sorrow of life is veiled more continuously with laughter, think to find happiness in looking upon the world, and, not finding it, go willingly back to their blindness. Their vision of happiness has been a dream only, "that it's in grand houses of gold they are, with speckled horses to ride," and their disillusion comes, when they "do be waking again, in a short while, and they destroyed with the cold, and the thatch dripping, maybe, and the starved ass braying in the yard." It is the lot of all Synge's people to awake thus from a dream, to the

reality, voiced by Deirdre, that "there's no safe place, Naisi, on the ridge of the world." "The dawn and the evening are a little while, the winter and the summer pass quickly, and what way would you and I, Naisi, have joy for ever?" The thought is but Ford's, that he had from Shakespeare:

> Crowns may flourish and decay,
> Beauties shine, but fade away.
> Youth may revel, yet it must
> Lie down in a bed of dust,

to which Synge has added the local intensity of his own abiding mood. But then there is this happiness again: "It should be a sweet thing to have what is best and richest, if it's for a short space only."

Here indeed is the stimulus of the finest tragedy, for may we not all make Naisi's answer: "We've a short space only to be triumphant and brave"?

Synge's is a brave and passionate drama, giving admiration to all that is strong and full of its own life; filled with tenderness also for young lives, with their little ways that none can equal, and for the old with their sorrow of lonesomeness that has no end; giving but a short shrift to fools. "The earth itself is a silly place, maybe," says Deirdre, "when a man's a fool and a talker," and the Playboy speaks

the brave clear tone of all the plays, when he looks round on the vehement rabble of the inappreciative, and chooses the supreme tragedy of lonesomeness rather; for "It's better to be lonesome than go mixing with the fools of earth."

VII

THE PREFACES

Art is often without self-consciousness, but criticism never; for criticism is a conscious evaluation of qualities, and its preferences are explicit, while the highest art may be based upon a preference that is buried deep, of which the artist himself may be unconscious. Art cannot be said to criticize, by merely providing a challenge to comparison. A palace side by side with a cottage, asserts the qualities of spaciousness and grandeur; the cottage, maybe, speaks out a homeliness absent in the other, and an equal adaptation of means to end: but palace says nothing of cottage, nor cottage of palace, till the qualities of both have alike entered the consciousness of a spectator, and been compared there, and have issued in an express preference, or series of preferences. The maker of the one need not of necessity be a critic, nor the maker of the other (although either might be); but the spectator who appre-

hended with equal justice the qualities of both, and who submitted them to a conscious evaluation, would be the true critic, though he were no maker of buildings at all. Thus good artists have been, like Blake or Swinburne, bad critics; while the best of critics, Hazlitt, was not a creative artist. Nothing is more familiar than for good painters to emerge into print, and with a curious regularity to go back to their studios leaving the point at issue a great deal less clear than they found it; for they are not always good critics, whether of their own work or someone else's. If this were not so, if a work of art rendered up the whole of its qualities to the merest passer-by, or if the artist himself were able to stand outside and assist to its exact appreciation, then the critic might say, with Mistress Overdone in the tragical comedy, "Why, here's a change indeed in the commonwealth! What shall become of me?"

It is sufficiently obvious that the artist's preference is for one aspect of life over another, while the critic's is for one aspect of art over another; but what is not always seen so clearly is, that the artist may, and often does, proceed to the act of creation with the material readiest to his hand, by natural impulse, and without consciousness of choice; while the whole business of the critic is based upon choice, of the motives

to which he must remain fully conscious. Criticism is not comparison merely; comparison enters into criticism, and the ability to compare is evidence of the preservation of proper values; but the observer of the cottage may be none the less passionate and faithful in the account he gives of its beauties, for leaving the palace out of his observation. Indeed, he may often be a great deal more simple and cogent, because undistracted, if he leave the business of comparison implicit, just as the artist leaves implicit his own principles of choice, if he have any. Reference is not revelation; you may be for ever saying that the cottage is not a palace, or the palace not a cottage, and give very little of the characteristic quality of either. The business of criticism is revelation, just as the business of art is revelation. All good art makes the beauty or truth of life more plain; and to make the beauty or truth of art more plain is the only function of criticism. Exegesis, the act of waiting upon an artist much as the artist waits upon life, may or may not be good criticism, in so far as it implies in the critic, or fails to imply, a conscious choice of standpoint; whether, by an achievement of imaginative sympathy, the standpoint of the artist, or of another more or less evidently out of register.

This ability to get out of register with his own work, and into register with someone else's—the faculty of detachment—is not always the artist's. To ask the artist to be detached, is to invite him to become distracted. The artist's concern is, and is bound to be, with his own work within an art, and not, like the critic's, with that art's scope and nature. Keats could not fairly appraise Shelley, Shelley not Wordsworth, Byron not Shelley nor Wordsworth. The absence of the critical faculty is a malady incident to artists; and to dramatists amongst them.

And yet to dramatists the explicit utterance of the conscious principles of their art is an abiding itch, so that the conjuncture of preface and play has become proverbial. Perhaps it is, that as their art takes on a greater and greater intensity, so its principles emerge into clearer view, and cry out for explicit statement. The economy of the dramatic form is so spare and self-denying, that the inclusive revelation of principles is not possible, as it is possible to Fielding in the inter-chapters of Tom Jones. Many dramatists have shown themselves excellent critics, when their principles have become explicit in a preface. Shakespeare used the dedication, the preface of his period, to purposes courtly rather than critical. Webster,

while employing it to engage the interest of a patron in his Duchess of Malfy, manages to sneer at those "ignorant scorners of the Muses, that like worms in libraries seem to live only to destroy learning," as he might sneer to day at those who dig in Maeterlinck or Synge for meanings, while allowing the power and beauty of the plays in the theatre to escape them; and in his preface to his White Devil, uses it to its modern purpose of apology, when he writes of the play: "It wanted (that which is the only grace and setting-out of a tragedy) a full and understanding auditory"; words with which Synge in his turn might have prefaced the *Playboy*, but did not, preferring, as we shall see, to employ his prefaces to other purposes than apology. Ford in introducing his pitiful tragedy which has not, to modern ears, a happy name, excuses the "lightness of his title" by the "gravity of his subject"—quite in the manner of Mr. Shaw easing the agony of one of his Unpleasant plays by putting a pleasantry in the title. Beaumont and Fletcher, in a Prologue, conclude:

> And those whose angry souls were not diseased
> With law, or lending Money, we have pleased—

thus mingling apology with the modern defiance of the art preferences of the Tired

Business Man; while Ben Jonson is always the good critic, and never better than when:

> He rather prays you will be pleased to see
> One such to-day, as other plays should be;
> Where neither chorus wafts you o'er the seas,
> Nor creaking throne comes down the boys to please:
> Nor nimble squib is seen to make afeard
> The gentlewomen; nor rolled bullet heard
> To say, it thunders; nor tempestuous drum
> Rumbles, to tell you when the storm doth come;
> But deeds, and language, such as men do use,
> And persons, such as comedy would choose,
> When she would shew an image of the times,
> And sport with human follies, not with crimes. . . .

Shirley anticipates the modern re-discovery that plays, if they may not be acted, may be published, and calls on the reader, in a preface, to congratulate his own happiness that, "in this Tragicall Age when the Theatre hath been so much out-acted," he still has liberty to read the plays, though the Puritans will not suffer him to see them. Dryden, a better critic than dramatist, prefaces his plays with almost too much protest of the pain and thought with which he, "From French and English Theatres has brought, Th'exactest Rules, by which a play is wrought." Goldsmith, in a preface to his first comedy, gives us criticism entirely to our purpose. He looks back to the writers of the happy age, when "the term, *genteel comedy*, was unknown amongst us, and little more was

desired by an audience, than nature and humour, in whatever walks of life they were most conspicuous." "Those who know anything of composition are sensible, that in pursuing humour, it will sometimes lead us into the recesses of the mean; I was even tempted to look for it in the master of a spunging house; but in deference to the public taste, grown of late, perhaps, too delicate, the scene of the bailiffs was retrenched in representation." He hopes "that too much refinement will not banish humour and character from ours, as it has already done from the French theatre. Indeed the French comedy is now become so very elevated and sentimental," says he, "that it has not only banished humour and Molière from the stage, but it has banished all spectators too."

To this pass, the English theatre need not come, if it submit itself to the influence, above all writers of our time, of J. M. Synge; an influence which it has been our business to estimate, and which Synge himself has been at pains to define.

ii

Synge's prefaces are three in number, two to plays and one to the poems; and each is economical and sufficient as are his stage directions. He did not apologize, nor protest; nor

did he employ the preface in the current fashion of vicarious exposition, which renders the appended play in strict fact unnecessary, and in effect anticlimax. Synge's prefaces are concerned to state explicitly the preferences that are implicit in all his plays. Set one of these plays side by side with the product of a leading British dramatist, and a comparison of qualities, it is true, is challenged. But the *Playboy of the Western World* is not criticism of The Walls of Jericho, or of the last musical comedy; the Preface to the *Playboy* is such criticism. Synge, when he ceases to be the dramatic artist, and becomes the dramatic critic, in these three little prose essays, shows a clearness of apprehension and expression, with an absolute unaffectedness, that give to his utterances their own sure niche in the small treasure house of the criticism that abides men's questioning.

The critic is spectator, and not artist; Synge, for the purpose of his prefaces, came so to the theatre, like any one of us. In happy ages of the drama, the spectator comes to the theatre, as the artist comes to life, with pleasure and excitement. The theatre should spread before our eyes a splendid repast, promising the food by which our imaginations live. More often in these days it is, says Synge, a chemist's or a dram-shop; "stocked with the drugs of many

seedy problems, or with the absinthe or vermouth of the last musical comedy"—with false reality, and falser joy. What is wrong with the theatre, that we no longer come to it as we should?

The divorce between life and literature—that is the brief and the tedious of it. Synge would rather say, between reality and joy. "On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy." The profound and common interests of life must be spoken of in a speech that is rich and living. But the good speech has gone only into elaborate books; and the realities of the life of a clique only have been given in the theatre in joyless and pallid words. The theatre, like Maeterlinck's heroines, has not been happy; and to make it happy again, men have given it two things, a so-called serious drama on the one hand, and the false joys of the musical comedy on the other. They have been well intentioned, but mistaken. For "the drama is made serious—in the French sense of the word—not by the degree in which it is taken up with problems that are serious in themselves, but by the degree in which it gives the nourishment, not very easy to define, on which our imaginations live." So long as the theatre fails to give this nourishment, there will be a running hither and thither, and a continual crying of peace where there is no peace.

All art is a collaboration; and until an art of the theatre is once more understood in which joy and reality may lie down together, there will be no more great drama. Men must regain their poetic feeling for ordinary life, as Synge did when he came back to the popular imagination of Ireland. "In Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery, and magnificent, and tender; so that those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers in places where the spring-time of the local life has been forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned into bricks."

So in these prefaces we have Synge the critic, going to the modern theatre for pleasure, and finding it wanting, and arriving at the reason for the want; choosing out his preferences, and proceeding, as artist, to build upon these a substructure of permanence for a drama of his own.

iii

Who better than Synge was sensible, "that in pursuing humour, it will sometimes lead us into the recesses of the mean"—the mean, so called by those grown too delicate? Goldsmith was tempted to look for humour in a spunging house, and the scene had to be retrenched in

representation; Synge, in a village shebeen, and his play is solemnly and publicly adjudicated by one of the unimportant small playmakers of his own movement to be "unfit for any stage." Goldsmith found himself compared, to his disadvantage, with the circumspective Mr. Cumberland, whose claim it was, as a dramatist, to "come at once upon the heart, refine, amend it, soften it"; but She Stoops to Conquer continues to delight us, while we no longer remember The West Indian. It will be so with the *Playboy*, and with the genteelest comedy that has graced the modern stage. "Of the things which nourish the imagination," says Synge, "humour is one of the most needful, and it is dangerous to limit or destroy it."

Comedy, as well as tragedy, finds its material in variations from the normal. There is a quiet spell to be put upon us by the recognition of the universal; the emotion of pleasure one feels before a picture by a Dutch painter, of a knuckle of ham, a jug of beer, and a loaf of bread with the knife still in it: a meal men came from three hundred years ago, and a meal one might just have come from to-day. Common things are interesting by recognition, and wonderful and wild things, by surprise: both are good motives to pleasure in art, but the second is more productive of comedy. Synge has a

full understanding of the humorous value of surprise: "there are wonders hidden in the heart of man": and a clear distinction where the abnormal ceases to be material for art. "In all the healthy movements of art, variations from the ordinary types of manhood are made interesting for the ordinary man, and in this way only the higher arts are universal. Beside this art, however, founded on the variations which are a condition and effect of all vigorous life, there is another art—sometimes confounded with it—founded on the freak of nature, in itself a mere sign of atavism or disease. This latter art, which is occupied with the antics of the freak, is of interest only to the variation from ordinary minds, and for this reason is never universal. To be quite plain, the tramp in real life, Hamlet and Faust in the arts, are variations; but the maniac in real life, and Des Esseintes and all his ugly crew in the arts, are freaks only."[1] And Synge, despite the *Playboy* and the opinion of the ignorant, is equally clear in his adherence to the critical intention of Ben Jonson, to "sport with human follies, not with crimes."

Synge wrote no prefaces until the *Playboy;*

[1] Not in the prefaces, but in *The Vagrants of Wicklow;* in place here, however, since it is perhaps Synge's only expression of critical opinion outside the prefaces.

he wrote one to that play, and one to the next, and died before he could put any word of introduction to his *Deirdre*. The third of the prefaces is the preface to the poems, and is perhaps the last thing that left his hand. "The strong things of life are needed in poetry also," he wrote, "to show that what is exalted or tender is not made by feeble blood."

iv

It should now be clear, if this study have not been altogether without value, that the things Synge preached are just exactly the things he practised. We have seen the preferences implicit in all his plays become concrete principles in his prefaces; the qualities and aspects he himself chose out from life, it has been the business of our criticism to choose out from his work. Criticism is often most serviceable, certainly most grateful, when critic and artist observe the same values.

It is, then, the achievement of J. M. Synge that he reconciled life and literature, and brought back both to amicable cohabitation in the theatre. The union is one that the English-speaking theatre has not been able to celebrate, in the same degree, for certainly more than a century. Good drama, while it must be good literature, must be much more also; and so it

comes about that for generations the theatre may be left to craftsmen who can supply a little of the more, but who are strangers to literature, and whom life evades also. Synge did more than re-open the theatre to a drama that is literature. The dramatist of our day is faced, one thinks, by two principal difficulties, both difficulties of reconciliation. The first is, to give the reality of a life that is always complex and sometimes dull, in a speech that shall yet be living and capable of pleasure; the second is, to give this reality in a form that shall be at once comprehensive and natural. Synge did both these things, by the power of his own intense vision. He brought the theatre back to its first concern, with *words;* and he made it plain that there can be no fine drama without an unfailing care for *form.* In a distracted theatre, in which there is a perpetual running hither and thither, Synge remains, "like a star fixed, not moved with any thunder." His clear light, absolutely his own burns as steadfast as his Deirdre's, and it will as certainly continue to illumine the time to come. It would be difficult to name another contemporary whose perdurable qualities are more certain. Synge, like Goldsmith, "flowered late," in the phrase of Dr. Johnson; he died at the age when Molière was writing his first successful comedy. The bulk of his work is small;

it may even be doubted whether he would have added very greatly to it, for the speech in which he chose to write had its own characteristic limitations—already he seemed to be going in some fear of repeating himself, and at his death his plans were rather for work other than dramatic. He spoke of putting the "Imitation of Christ" into the beautiful prose of his translations. If he had lived, he could not but have added to the number of his plays; and yet, in the six plays he has left us, what that is essential in life has he failed to include? Our mention, in making this study, has been of the greatest names, and not unsuitably; for, try as we will, in looking back over his work, we cannot be rid of the sense of his absolute achievement. Not width but intensity is the aim of art, said Wilde, in one of his accidental moments of true vision. Certainly, of all the arts, it is true of the dramatic.

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1903. Oct. 8. *In the Shadow of the Glen.* At the Molesworth Hall, Dublin.

1904. Feb. 25. *Riders to the Sea.* At the Molesworth Hall, Dublin.

1905. Feb. *The Well of the Saints.* At the Abbey Theatre, Dublin.

1907. Jan. 26. *The Playboy of the Western World.* At the Abbey Theatre, Dublin.

1907. June. *The Playboy of the Western World*, etc. First performed in London; at the Great Queen Street Theatre.

1909. [Mar. 24. J. M. Synge died.]

1909. Nov. 11. *The Tinker's Wedding.* At His Majesty's Theatre, London (The Afternoon Theatre).

1910. Jan. 13. *Deirdre of the Sorrows.* At the Abbey Theatre, Dublin.

1911. Oct. *The Playboy of the Western World*, etc. First performed in United States of America.

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